

Choosing The Important Relationships 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Introduction:

This is the last of the seven lessons we've studied under the title "hard sayings of the New Testament." We've looked at four statements from Jesus which he made either to his disciples or would-be disciples. In those lessons we looked at the following topics: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit; hating one's biological relatives; persecution; and the potential idolatry of wealth. After those lessons, we moved to things Paul had to say to the church in the unique social situation of the city of Corinth. Today's lesson fits that second group, with a text from 2 Corinthians. However, this one doesn't reflect the theological or societal issues unique to Corinth, but rather the whole issue of interpersonal relationships in a broader society, the majority of which is neither Jewish nor Christian.

Almost all of Paul's ministry experience after his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus was that of proclaiming the gospel and planting churches in predominantly Gentile, pagan environments. (Here I'm assuming a moral connotation to the word, 'pagan,' such that not all Gentiles could be categorized by that word.) Paul's family experience growing up was that of Jews living in the diaspora. Diaspora Jews were governed by a different set of rules than the life patterns of Judaism in Palestine. In the diaspora (that is, outside Palestine), Jews needed to maintain certain meaningful relationships with at least a few Gentiles just to fulfil the needs of everyday living. The differences between religious faith and cultural acceptance were both essential in determining the level of importance any such relationship could have. What Paul has to develop in his ministry is a sense of standards attached to any social, business, or other relationships that prioritized one's relationship to Christ and to Christ's followers above other standards of commonality of purpose in relationships with non-believers.

At different times in our lives, there are relationships that become more or less important to us. Early in our adulthood, the issue of a marriage partner becomes a very important one. Not very many marriages get to the 50-year mark, but in the church, it would appear that the percentage is higher than in the broader society. That's not automatic, of course, as many of us know. However, as one becomes "single again" later in life, the question of marriage has a whole different set of priorities to consider.

As we look at this lesson, we must understand that there are many other interpersonal relationships we need to develop and maintain to have a fulfilled life. Today's lesson calls us to develop wisdom in facing the issues involved in developing such relationships with persons outside the Christian faith community.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

What are some of the relationships that we develop which are either necessary or helpful to creating a fulfilling lifestyle in our culture?

The point of this lesson, as I see it, is the weight of issues cited in the following questions as they relate to the purpose of each of these relationships. All of us could add other questions to this list.

1. What do we have in common? Is that commonality strong enough to counter the differences between us?
2. What differences are there in our life's goals as they relate to this relationship?
3. How will similarities and/or differences in our social situation (education, social background, life experiences, etc.) affect the depth of the relationship that I would expect to have?

These are the issues that are not addressed in our text, but need to be taken into consideration.

I. The opening statement: 2 Corinthians 6:14a (the first sentence in the verse)

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” This is how the most up-to-date NIV version of the Bible translates this sentence. It is a weak translation, because the Greek word for “yoked together” in this verse is a rare compound verb, one part of which is not included in this translation. The word appears only here in all of the New Testament. As often as Jesus used the “yoke” as a metaphor in his teaching, it would only be right to translate this rare use of “yoke” in some significant way. It isn’t easy. I’ve been working on it for a couple of days. It means “strangely yoked together,” or “uncommonly yoked together.” The reference behind this metaphor is Leviticus 19:19, where the literal language of the law directs Israelites to not yoke a mule and an ox together as a team of work animals. We could think of all kinds of reasons as to why that would just be a stupid thing to do. They’re not the same species of animal. The word added to “yoke” here, to create this rare compound, is “hetero,” which can have the meaning of “another species,” or, at the very least, “something unlike.”

We have to face the fact, that hetero-sexual marriage has its difficulties, because the two parties are different by the very nature of their gender. Admittedly, we have no sign of discord between Adam and Eve until sin entered the picture; but it’s also true that God’s sanctifying grace at work in both a husband and a wife does not eliminate all potential causes for disagreement. I’m using the illustration of marriage here, because this verse has most likely been applied in the church more to pre-marital counselling than to any other topic which Paul may have had in mind as he wrote this text. We looked at other topics to consider.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How important is our commitment to Christ in establishing the list of “things we have in common” when creating an alliance?
2. What are other things we have in common that need to be considered?
3. What role do wisdom and experience play in determining the level of relationship being developed?

II. Teaching through rhetorical questions. 2 Cor. 6:14b-16a&b

Last Sunday morning, Dr. Bowling mentioned that Jesus used at least 300 questions during his teaching. Here, even though Paul's opening statement is a prohibition, the rest of this section is a series of rhetorical questions, whose presumed answers would have seriously negative content. On pages 29-30 of the lesson quarterly, George Lyons has printed those questions into statements. (See the endnote.)ⁱ If you've read the lesson, you should have noticed the difference between approaching the topics with rhetorical questions and seeing the point as a series of negative statements. All five of the questions are created in a completely parallel construction, each with the following elements:

- the interrogative word, "what?"
- a noun having the sense of commonality
- (the understood but not present verb, "is there")
- two other nouns, opposites in each case, in a form that creates the sense of "between"
- the conjunction, "and."

Paul had been accused by this congregation in the past as having few oratorical skills. In these questions he uses five different words, each of which has the meaning of "commonality." Thus, every question is heard at once as both, "What commonality is there between . . .?" and unique words which indicate not all commonality is common. However, only one of the five words was commonly used to mean "holding in common" (all puns intended). That's the second one, translated as "fellowship." See below.

All the other words that Paul uses here are rare in the New Testament, 3 out of the 4 are used only here. (This entire construction is one way Paul uses to say he has a fairly broad vocabulary and he knows how to use it with rhetorical skill.)

The **first** one has the sense of participation: "What participation is there between righteousness and unrighteousness?"

The **second** is the common one. It's the word *koinonia*, a Greek word with which many of us are familiar. "What fellowship is there between light and darkness?"

The **third** is built on the idea of "same sound, or same voice." Thus, "What harmony is there between Christ and Belial?" (In Jewish intertestamental literature Belial is a reference to the devil or Satan. This is the only time this word is used in the New Testament.)

The **fourth** word has the meaning of something cut from the same origin—often translated 'portion': two acres from the same plot of ground; two parts of an inheritance; two pieces from the same pizza; two logs from the same tree. In other words, "What portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?" (ESV 2001)

The **last** one means 'agreement based on approval.' "What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?" This NIV translation is fine, with one exception—the word 'temple' needs to be repeated before idols in the translation, "the temple of God and [the temple] of idols." NOTE: in vv.14-16, there are 6 Greek words used only here in the NT.

Side Bar: The only temple of God in terms of a building, at the time Paul is writing this letter, is that of the temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore, it was Jewish and not Christian, and as such would have had no real significance for the Corinthian believers. There was no building

functioning as a temple to Christ anywhere in the world yet, as far as we know. On the other hand, all the other gods or goddesses worshiped by different groups in Corinth would have had their own major worship buildings, including the very famous temple to Aphrodite atop the acro-Corinth which still dominates the skyline of Corinth today. Paul, therefore, has to take time to describe what he means by “the temple of God.” It is the believers themselves, both individually and corporately who are the “temple” of God because God dwells in them and among them through the Holy Spirit of God, a true spiritual presence, not just some carved idol.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What effect does this list of opposites have in considering the relationships one needs to develop?
2. In Greco-Roman society, having a job and getting your daily food required important interpersonal relationships. New believers already had some of those developed before becoming believers. What do you think this text was saying to them? What about to us?

III. The covenant liturgy. 2 Cor. 6:16c-7:1

This issue was important enough for Paul that he actually created a covenant liturgy by compiling texts from several sources in the Old Testament. This liturgy opens with the phrases I mentioned last week, “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” This clause appears throughout both testaments, in the form of a wedding vow. All of the words in verses 17 & 18 fit the same pattern: they are the speech of solemn vows. The words in verse 17, taken from the King James 1611 version, “Come ye apart,” served as the title for decades of the Nazarene devotional quarterly, which is now called “Reflecting God.”

The Old Testament is filled with the language of adultery in relationship to Israel’s unfaithfulness to their covenant with God. Here Paul uses that same imagery in discussing the question of the importance of choices that have to be made in creating the relationships needed for everyday living. In last week’s lesson, it was obvious that Paul recognized the need for being in contact with non-believers on a regular basis, and to do so without judgment. What this section says to us, as we close this lesson, is that the record of Scripture reminds us that there are lines we can’t cross without breaking our vows to God and to Christ. As we mature in Christ, we may be able to make some personal adjustments, but we each must remain clear as to where our lines are. On the other hand, any disagreements we may have with our brothers and sisters in Christ as to where those lines are, should never limit our expression of love for each other. The perfecting of holiness needs to continually increase our capacity to love our neighbor as much as it needs to maintain clear limits of acceptable behavior.

ⁱⁱ Dr. Lyons lists the following assertions as counterparts to the five rhetorical questions in 2 Cor. 6:14-16:

1. Righteousness and wickedness share nothing in common.
2. Light and darkness have no fellowship.
3. Christ and Belial cannot live in harmony.
4. Believers have no portion with unbelievers.
5. The temple of God and the temples of idols cannot agree.