

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:4

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 October 2026

Preacher: Joshua Russell

[0:00] Good morning, everyone. It's great to see you all this morning. Do turn with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 6 and we'll keep working our way through 2 Corinthians this morning. If you're new with us this morning, our usual practice is just to work our way through books of the Bible, section by section, to see what God is saying to us in the words that He has inspired.

So we're working through 2 Corinthians. We've been doing that for, I don't know, a couple of months now and we'll be doing it until the end of the year. We're up to chapter 6, verse 14. Let me read it for us.

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? 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.

Therefore, go out from their midst and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing. Then I will welcome you and I will be a father to you and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.

[1:24] Since 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.

Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one. We have corrupted no one. We have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you. For I said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together.

I am acting with great boldness towards you. I have great pride in you. I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy. This is the word of the Lord.

All right. And you'll find an outline of my talk inside your bulletins. If you want to follow along there, that'll help you. And the kids have a special outline of my talk where you can color in a sheep and a goat and other things like that.

So hopefully you can have some fun with that as we listen to God's word together. Who are the unbelievers? That is the most difficult thing to work out in this passage.

[2:31] When Paul says, do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers, who are the unbelievers he is talking about? Who were they back in ancient Corinth and who might they be today?

He doesn't immediately say. And for some people, this has been taken as an opportunity to go in various different directions. You might have heard this passage used in the context of marriage, for instance.

Christians shouldn't marry non-Christians. Which, of course, is absolutely true. But hardly what this passage is talking about. It's really nowhere in the context, a sort of secondary application at best. I was reading an article this week, though, where the author was saying that, you know, based on this passage, men and women shouldn't have different roles in a marriage. A husband should not have authority over his wife because that would be an unequal yoking.

Seems to me to be a rather strange interpretation. Given, number one, that this passage says nothing about marriage. And number two, that Paul, very clearly elsewhere, talks about the different roles of husbands and wives.

[3:37] Likewise, you might have heard this passage applied in the world of business. Christians shouldn't go into business with non-Christians. Maybe we shouldn't run schools together or join forces politically or be in the military.

And there may be some wisdom to that. You know, we ought to think carefully about who we can work with, who we can trust, who we might subject ourselves to, subordinate ourselves to if we can help it.

Do we have shared values? Can we cooperate in a system ruled by DEI quotas and secularism? But again, that's hardly on the surface of this passage, is it? Some scholars think that Paul is warning the Corinthians here of the dangers of participating in pagan sacrifices.

Remember, he talked about that kind of thing back in 1 Corinthians. But it seems to me that that kind of is a bit out of the blue here, if that's what he has in mind.

He doesn't mention idolatry, for instance, at any other point in 2 Corinthians. He doesn't, even when he lists various Corinthian sins, he doesn't include idolatry among them. So, as usual, I think one of the most important things for understanding any passage is to think about the context.

[4:56] How does this passage fit into the flow of Paul's argument in 2 Corinthians? Where have we come from? Where are we going? And so, for me, as I was trying to tackle and unravel this puzzle this week, I think one of the most helpful verses in the book to begin unraveling this enigma is right at the end of the book, in the very last chapter.

So, come with me to chapter 13, verse 5. I can't quite remember which verses I've put up on the screen and which I haven't. But, anyway, come with me to chapter 13, verse 5. Where Paul is going to say to the Corinthians, examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.

That's a bit unfortunate that in English, unbelief and faith sound like completely different words. But it's really the same root word in the Greek. This is how Paul is using this vocabulary in this book. If you're wondering who are the unbelievers, in other words, in a sense, at least by the end of the book, Paul is going to say to the Corinthians, well, you tell me. Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.

Which makes me think, I wonder if he's being deliberately ambiguous or general at this point, earlier in the book, in chapter 6.

[6:24] We all want to know who the unbelievers are, at least the scholars and the commentators, that's where they all sort of go. But I wonder if, for good reason, Paul isn't quite playing ball yet.

Roy put it to me this week, quite helpfully I think as we were discussing this, that maybe it's a little bit like the prophet Nathan when he goes to David. Do you remember that story?

Nathan tells David a story about a rich man who stole a little lamb from his poor neighbor. And David is so angry and horrified that he says that the man ought to be put to death.

And then Nathan turns on him and says to him, you are the man. Because it's all a parable about what he'd done with Bathsheba, how he'd stolen her from her husband and then had Uriah killed. So I wonder if in the same way, Paul is slowly but surely building his case against the unbelievers throughout this book. Holding back a little until he's ready to kind of thrust the sword in, as it were.

[7:32] And in fact, they may be quite impossible to name, since they may be hiding among the Corinthians themselves. You see, this is one of the perennial features of the kingdom of God until the last day.

Jesus talked about the sheep and the goats. Or the wheat and the weeds. In our midst, even this morning. I'm sorry to say, there may well be goats among us.

It's impossible to tell. You might be a goat. How would you know? Men or women who look like believers, but aren't.

Who may even feel themselves that they are believers and will cry out, Lord, Lord, on the last day, but will be rejected. It's a scary thought, isn't it?

Think of Jesus' own disciples. When Jesus told them that a traitor was in their midst. Do you remember? How they all responded going around the table. Is it I, Lord?

[8:30] Is it I? Who is it? Or in Acts chapter 20, Paul warns the Ephesian elders, I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. What a tragic thought.

I've often said to the Unichurch congregation, who do you think is the most dangerous person at Unichurch? Surely it's me. That's the nature of leadership, isn't it?

It's the people that we trust. It's actually our friends, our husbands or wives. It's our elders, our pastors.

Because for better or worse, our spiritual destinies become intertwined, don't they? We influence one another. It's easy to bat off false teaching when it comes from far away, from a stranger.

[9:32] From an American, maybe. But what about when it comes from within? My Catherine's growth group have been studying Deuteronomy this year, and she reminded me of this passage in chapter 13.

This is what God commanded the people through Moses. If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son, or your daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your friend, who is as your own soul, entices you, saying, let us go and serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known. Some of the gods of the peoples who are around you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other. You shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him, but you shall kill him.

Your hand shall be first against him, to put him to death, and afterward the hand of the people, of all the people. You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

And all Israel shall hear and fear and never again do any such wickedness as this among you. It's a brutal passage, isn't it?

[10:57] And of course the church in the new covenant is not a civil entity. Jesus said, my kingdom is none of this world. Part of what that means is that you can't really set up a Christian nation here on earth.

There's no such thing. There can be nations with lots of Christians and great Christian influence, but we're not really setting up a nation, a Christian nation like Israel. The sword belongs to the government, not to the church.

But, what this passage is teaching us, this theological principle, is no less serious for today. We need to be on our guard, not to be led astray by those who are closest to us, our husbands and wives, our best friends.

It's hard to hold your ground, to see straight and to keep thinking clearly, when someone you love, someone you respect, starts to change. Which is all to say that Paul doesn't tell us just yet who the unbelievers are.

And I think, probably for very good reason and with a particular strategy in mind. Now the image of a yoke has to do with working together.

[12:06] Yoking two animals together so that they can plough a field. The wise farmer will pick two animals that are roughly equal in strength and size and weight. If you were to yoke an ox to a donkey or a mule to a buffalo, you can imagine that one might pull against the other or dominate the other.

It would make life very difficult. And in fact, in the Old Testament, in the book of Deuteronomy again, God's people were even commanded not to do this. In Deuteronomy chapter 22, verse 10, you shall not plough with an ox and a donkey together.

Which of course is not really just about the impracticalities of such a thing. It's about the symbolism. God did not want his people mixing with the pagans, with the nations around them, compromising their holiness.

So there are a whole load of rules in the Old Testament about mixing different kinds of fabrics or mixing different kinds of seeds in the same field. There's nothing really morally wrong with any of that, with any of mixing in those kinds of ways.

It's just that the Old Testament is full of these pictures, these symbolic pictures to teach the people about holiness. They are to be separate, to be distinct from the world.

[13:21] And so are we. So in the same way, Paul is drawing on this image to say that the Corinthians mustn't compromise their holiness by co-working with the unbelievers.

For, he goes on, what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial?

Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? So you see how Paul layers up this partnership language that, of course, we've seen before in the letter.

Five words. Partnership, fellowship, accord, portion, agreement. The nuances don't really matter massively. The point is about compatibility, being yoked together.

How can those who are committed to righteousness work together with those who are committed to lawlessness? They'll pull in opposite directions. How can we have fellowship? How can there be fellowship between light and darkness?

[14 : 25] That's the word Paul used back in chapter 1, *koinonia*, right? Fellowship's about sharing. Because remember, this whole letter is about how Paul wants the Corinthians to share with him, to be in partnership with him, in fellowship with him, in authentic gospel ministry.

But the flip side of that is that he wants to warn them off, sharing with others, having fellowship with unbelievers, with those who dwell in the darkness.

The word accord in verse 15 kind of has musical overtones. It's about making a harmonious sound together. How can Christ and Belial accord with one another? It'd be like mixing a jazz piano with fingernails on our blackboard.

Belial is another name for Satan. This is the only time in the New Testament that this word appears. But it comes from the Hebrew word for worthlessness. So actually, if we were just to keep reading where we left off back in Deuteronomy 13, Moses goes on to say, if you hear in one of your cities, which the Lord your God is giving you, to dwell there, that certain worthless fellows have gone out among you and have drawn away the inhabitants of the city, saying, let us go and serve other gods, etc., etc.

The word there for worthless fellows is literally sons of Belial. Or likewise, in 1 Samuel chapter 2, Eli's sons are described as sons of Belial because they were abusing their position as priests.

[15 : 59] So Paul is using it here to hint at the unbelievers he has in mind. Leaders who abuse their authority. Or even just members who start to drift and drag away others from Christ towards worthless things.

What portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? So Paul has these five words about partnership and five contrasting pairs like fire and water.

These are things that cannot mix, that are incompatible. How could one yoke them together? Righteousness and lawlessness, light and darkness. And then he picks up on and riffs on that last image.

For he says, we are the temple of the living God. Didn't you know that, Corinthians? We can't let unbelievers, idolaters, corrupt and compromise our holiness because we are God's sanctuary.

The home of the true and living God. And then Paul brings in a bunch of different quotes all kind of mashed together to prove his point. So the first one is from Leviticus chapter 26.

[17 : 12] Let me read verses 11 to 13. where God promised the people of Israel, I will make my dwelling among you and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God and you shall be my people.

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect. In the context, God is promising the people of Israel peace and prosperity in the land if they will obey his commandments. It's interesting how he brings up the language of a yoke there too, isn't it? That God once freed the people of Israel from their yoke of slavery. He doesn't want them to be yoked again.

The second quote is from Isaiah 52. In verse 17, Paul doesn't flag it but he just sort of starts to blend in Isaiah 52, 11. Which of course is just before the famous servant song of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53.

This time it is about a new exodus. Isaiah foretold that God's people would be taken into captivity in Babylon until God would come to set them free, to comfort them, to lead them on a new and better exodus out of Babylon and ultimately into the new creation.

[18 : 30] And so in Isaiah 52, Isaiah writes, Awake, awake! Put on your strength, O Zion! Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city!

For there shall no more come into you, the uncircumcised and the unclean. Shake yourselves from the dust and arise. Be seated, O Jerusalem! Loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter of Zion!

Skipping down a few verses. Break forth into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted His people. He has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared His holy arm before the eyes of all the nations and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

And then here's where Paul's quote begins. Depart, depart. Go out from there. Touch no unclean thing. Go out from the midst of her.

Purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the Lord. See, Isaiah's talking about a new exodus, a new and better escape from Egypt. Getting that yoke off their necks, once and for all, finally purifying themselves.

[19 : 41] Paul wants the Corinthians to do the same. To be the holy temple, the pure priesthood that God has set them free to be. In verse 18, the last section of Paul's quote is primarily drawn from 2 Samuel chapter 7, where God promised David that one of his sons would be God's own son.

This is 2 Samuel chapter 7 verse 12. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you who shall come from your body and I will establish his kingdom.

He shall build a house for my name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father and he shall be to me a son. In the first instance, that son, of course, is our Lord Jesus himself.

But now Paul clearly expands that out. He wants to include daughters as well, notice. And he's saying that in Christ, all of us, both men and women, have become part of God's household.

So we are God's house in two senses, right, just like in 2 Samuel. We are God's temple God's dwelling place, built by God's own son, the true son of David.

[20 : 54] God lives in us by his Holy Spirit. This is why we don't need to go to any temple or holy special building or something made of bricks and stone anymore, right, and to do so would be to blaspheme the true temple of God.

But secondly, we are God's household in the sense that, or God's house in the sense of his household. We are part of his family. We can call on God as our father.

We have been grafted into the royal lineage of Israel. So Paul's punchline is in chapter 7, verse 1. Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of the Lord, in the fear of God.

You notice the New Testament ethic is always be who you are. Paul is saying that we are the temple of the living God. So we should cleanse ourselves.

We should act like it. Even though we often sin, the New Testament never says that Christians are sinners. Just the opposite. We are saints.

[22 : 06] And because we are saints, we ought to live saintly lives. Even though we don't always, and we won't ever be able to do that perfectly until glory.

But we ought to because we are. That said, there is a condition here. Did you notice that? Take a closer look. See how the command in verse 17 connects to the promise.

The Lord says, go out from their midst and be separate from them, and then I will welcome you.

Then I will be a father to you, and so on. While ever the church is mixed, I think there will always be this kind of possibility or this inescapable uncertainty.

We can be totally assured that Jesus is a perfect Savior. If we trust in Him, we'll join Him in glory in eternity. But to some degree, the assurance of our own salvation also has to take into account whether we actually separate ourselves out from the unbelievers when God calls us to.

And if we don't flee sin and live holy lives, if we continue to unite ourselves with the unbelievers, if we find no difficulty in yoking ourselves to completely different creatures, well, guess what?

[23 : 27] We might be one of them. That is prima facie evidence that we are unbelievers ourselves. If we fit so snugly working together, we might need to rethink who we are, whether we've really been born again and made into new creation or part of the new creation.

And notice how Paul reiterates how serious this is by stating three times that these are not just his words but God's. In verse 16, as God said. In verse 17, says the Lord. In verse 18, says the Lord Almighty.

That's why in verse 1, he calls upon us to cleanse ourselves, to bring holiness to completion in the fear of God.

Remember that little axiom from a couple of weeks ago. Fear brings wisdom. Wisdom brings safety. And in that way, paradoxically, fear, and particularly fearing God, is actually the key to liberating us from all of our other fears.

Okay, but finally, that brings us into chapter 7, verse 2, which strangely enough, it might sound like we've heard before. You could almost read straight from chapter 6, verse 13, into chapter 7, verse

2, just jumping over our passage entirely without sort of noticing anything was missing.

[24:53] Right? Do you notice that? How Paul sort of seamlessly just keeps talking about how he wants the Corinthians to open wide their hearts to him. But of course, Paul is being quite deliberate here, structuring his material in this way.

I think it makes his point perfectly. See, he's saying that the Corinthians have to choose, don't they? They have a choice between righteousness and lawlessness, between light and darkness, Christ and Belial.

But the presenting issue, or the punchline, if you like, is that they also have a choice between Paul and the super apostles.

Right? You see, that's where this is heading. I've tried to hold out on you as long as I possibly could. The whole book of 2 Corinthians is driving at this. It's about gospel partnership.

Paul's aim is to reestablish the Corinthians as his partners in new covenant, cross-shaped ministry ministry after a few rocky years. In fact, do you know, in Philippians 4, verse 3, Paul even calls one of his gospel co-workers his true yoke fellow.

[26:05] Right? His true yoke fellow. I think it's in the footnote in the ESV, but look up Philippians 4, verse 3. Right? A person who you yoke yourself to, in Paul's vocabulary, is a fellow gospel worker.

Paul sees himself as an ox working hard with the rest of us to try and take the gospel of the Lord Jesus to the ends of the earth. Paul wants the Corinthians to yoke themselves to him.

And on the flip side of that, that means also that he wants to rescue them from the peddlers of God's word we met back in chapter 2 or from the super apostles as he calls them later on.

So of course Paul wants to juxtapose these two messages do you see. Unbelievers is maybe too weak a word for them because they're not just goats as far as Paul is concerned.

They're wolves dressed up in sheep's clothing. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 Paul will say, For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you or devours you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or strikes you in the face.

[27:12] To my shame I must say we were too weak for that. Right? Dripping with sarcasm. It's like the Corinthians have Stockholm Syndrome. You're more than happy to put the yoke of slavery on again and take abuse from these super apostles that you think are so impressive.

But why? When we're the ones who really love you. Yoke yourselves to us. So I love that that comment he has in verse 3 back in just chapter 7 verse 3.

Love that comment Paul says, I said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together. And again, remember that's gospel ministry language there.

Going back to chapter 4 the gospel ministry is all about dying so that others might live carrying the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be manifest. And so Paul is calling on the Corinthians to join him in gospel ministry to live and die together.

in gospel fellowship as brothers and sisters yoked together co-workers for the cause of Christ. Absolutely wholeheartedly devoted.

[28:23] So as we wrap up, who are the unbelievers? You tell me. I tried to hold off on it as long as I could but I hope that by the end of things you could see where this was going.

Of course what Paul is talking about is the super apostles. And what he's doing in this letter as he goes through is he's bringing the image of the super apostles into sharper and sharper focus so that the Corinthians hopefully can begin to see them for what they really are.

You know, they're not suffering servants like Christ. They're peddlers of God's word. They're not being honest with your conscience. They're unbelievers.

And by the end of the book he's going to say they're agents of Satan. At the same time Paul is challenging the Corinthians. It's not just that it's not just that if they don't pick him then he'll be sad. You know? No, the truth is that if they yoke themselves to the super apostles then they will show themselves to be unbelievers as well. goats all along rejecting the true ambassador of Christ in the name of these phonies.

[29:42] So friends, this morning the choice is put before each one of us as well. Righteousness or lawlessness light or darkness Christ or Belial and in a very real sense Paul or the super apostles of course we can't exactly partner with Paul 2,000 years later in the same way that he was calling on the Corinthians to do that.

But we still have a choice between standing with him and the kind of new covenant cross-shaped ministry that he did. I hope at SLBC that you can see that it means partnering together in ministry. The kind of ministry that's been happening here for 30 years. Preaching the gospel like Paul and getting into trouble like Paul. Raising up ministry trainees like Paul. Calling people to repent like Paul. And being deadly serious about holiness like Paul. And instead of drifting into comfortable Christianity, the kind of Christianity that demands nothing from us. The kind of Christianity that flatters people. instead of speaking to their consciences. The kind of Christianity that you can get by on with no suffering, no weakness, no conflict, no holiness. [31:02] Just five star reviews, popular acclaim, loved by the world. May God have mercy on us. Protect us from being fooled by the deceitful techniques of every shady gospel salesman that comes our way. Let's pray. Oh Lord, do have mercy upon us. Please protect us and help us. Keep us on the straight and narrow. Keep us yoked together and yoked with the Apostle Paul co-working in authentic gospel ministry for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ and his glory. Help us not to be deceived by those who would lead us astray. Even when we're tempted in our own hearts, we pray that you would steal us and help us to quickly wake up and come back. Even if those who are closest to us wander astray, we pray that you would help us not to drift with them, to graciously, gently, and firmly call them back to repentance and not go with them at all. [32:26] We pray, Father, that for many years to come, the gospel might flourish in our church and in our area, that it might spread far and wide, bringing many to faith and rolling back the works of darkness. and pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.