

# “They Shall Be My People”

## The Sixth in a Series of Sermons on 2 Corinthians

*Texts: 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; Jeremiah 31:31-37*

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**A**lthough it is very hard for us to believe, the Apostle Paul was forced to defend his apostolic authority in a church which he helped to found. In making this defense of his unique calling in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul directs the Corinthians back to the very same gospel which he first preached in Corinth. This gospel, which centers upon the proclamation of Christ crucified, reconciles God to sinners, sinners back to God, and is the means through which believers are reckoned righteous before God. Paul proclaims this message (even though it is a scandal to Greeks and Romans) because the New Covenant is vastly superior to the fading glory of the Old, and because the long anticipated day of salvation has finally come. Paul now exhorts the Corinthians to realize that they themselves are the living temple of God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and that they must leave behind all of their pagan ways of thinking and doing.

As we resume our series on 2 Corinthians, we come to the end of chapter six (and the opening verse of chapter 7). Throughout the past several sermons, we have been looking at Paul’s defense of his apostolic office in the face of a serious challenge raised to his authority by a group of men in Corinth whom Paul calls “false apostles” (chapter 11). Beginning in 2 Corinthians 2:14, Paul has been defending his apostolic office against this challenge by engaging in a running argument (of sorts) which concludes with our text this morning (at the end of chapter 6). Throughout this opening section of 2 Corinthians, Paul has covered much ground, but he has focused upon the contrast between the fading glory of the Old Covenant (and its veiled mediator, Moses) with the far greater glory of the New Covenant, which has been ratified by the shed blood of its mediator, Jesus Christ.

Throughout Paul’s defense of his office, we get a hint at some of the issues being raised in the Corinthian church in Paul’s absence. The false apostles, apparently, were contending that Paul is too boring a preacher, that he lacks personal charisma, and as skilled rhetoricians, these men knew how keep an audience on the edge of their seat (unlike Paul, who preaches an unpopular message about crucified Savior). To ensure their own popularity and that nothing too offensive gets in the way of their flowery and lofty speech (so loved by the Greeks of that age), the false apostles are perfectly willing to sand down the gospel and remove the rough edges to make the cross of Christ less offensive to an audience eager and expecting to be stirred and entertained by classical rhetoric.

Ironically, in their attempts to undermine Paul’s authority, the false apostles and those taken in by them, end up in the same place as those Jews who still rely upon doing enough good works to earn favor with God. Sadly, whenever the Jews hear the law read aloud, Paul says that their minds and hearts are veiled to the truth of the gospel. The law stands outside of them (written upon stone tablets and in the Torah), demanding perfect obedience from all, yet giving no one the power to obey the law’s demands. Tied to the blessing/curse principle (God will bless those who obey his commandments and curse those who disobey them), the law inflicts the curse upon the disobedient. As Paul says, the wages of sin is death, and the purpose of the law is to both excite sin in us, as well as to show us how sinful we truly are.

Like those trusting in the fading glory of the Old Covenant, which, after the coming of Jesus Christ is now fulfilled and therefore rendered obsolete, the false apostles also rely upon the external. In their minds, eloquent speech brings a large audience which is the surest sign of success. The scandal of the cross (a

crucified Savior) was not acceptable to them. So, like the Jews of Paul's day, the only thing these false apostles can proclaim is a fading glory which offers no ultimate solution to the problem of human sin and its wages—wages which are self-evident in the sinfulness of our hearts, and weakness of our bodies. As Paul puts it, the false teachers consider spiritual things from the perspective of the flesh, not from the perspective of the new creation, which has dawned with the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

Therefore, when the false apostles point to Paul's apparent physical weakness (the result of the difficult travel, and physical abuse he has suffered) and lack of personal charisma, Paul sees this much differently. Although he had indeed reached a point of great despair—to the point that he didn't even think he could go on—God opened the door for Paul to go and preach the gospel in Greece (Macedonia) and Asia Minor (Troas). Paul speaks of this missionary endeavor as a triumphal procession of Christ, as well as a fragrant aroma to the Lord. Paul knows that the Risen Christ is his sufficiency. Paul is not forced to reply upon his eloquence or a carefully crafted message which tickles the ears of first century Greeks.

Paul knows full well that the letter of the law kills (that it inflicts a curse upon us because of human disobedience). He also knows that the Holy Spirit gives life. It is the Spirit who regenerates us, renews us daily, and then ensures that we are raised from the dead at the end of the age. The ministry of the New Covenant era is the ministry of reconciliation. Because the day of salvation has come, and the old covenant has passed away, we now rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit, which gives life to the dead, turns the human heart from a heart of stone into a heart of flesh, and serves as a down payment (or pledge) which ensures the resurrection of our bodies at the end of the age.

More important, the gospel Paul preaches has been revealed to him by Jesus Christ. The gospel brings light where there had been only spiritual darkness before. It is the gospel which illumines that which the devil seeks to keep hidden. It is the gospel that brings hope to sinners in our fallen condition so aptly described by Paul as life in a tent, or in a jar of clay (a reference to the curse and death, which shadows us all). It is the light of the gospel through which the power of the Holy Spirit lifts the veil over our minds and hearts, and which enables us to see the cross of Jesus Christ for what it is—the means through which God reconciles himself to us, and us to him, and through which our sins are forgiven. This is why we must leave behind that which is destined to perish, and why we must hold fast to that which is eternal! This is why we walk by faith, and not by sight. These are the blessings of the day of salvation which has now come, because Christ has died for our sins, and was raised from the dead.

So, with that background in mind, we turn to our text, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. Paul has spent significant time spelling out the contrast between the Old Covenant and the New. Since Paul has instructed his hearers about both the nature and content of the ministry of reconciliation (the preaching of Christ crucified), he now takes up the practical implications of life in the New Covenant. Paul wraps up his defense of his apostolic ministry by reminding the Corinthians of the fact that when they came to faith in Christ they made a significant break with their pagan past. They must now think and act like Christians. They must reject the “gospel-peddling” and “ear-tickling” of the false apostles. The Corinthians must “come out” and be separate from those attacking Paul and practicing idolatry.

In verses 14-16a, Paul lays out a general theological principle which has wide-ranging implications. “*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?*” We start with Paul's language of a Christian being unequally yoked with an unbeliever—a command, not a suggestion. The image is that of two different kinds of animals being placed together in the same yoke. It is not going

to work out. The animals will not work together, and at best will plow in circles.

The theological background to Paul's comments are found in two Old Testament passages. The first is Leviticus 19:19—"You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material." The second is Deuteronomy 22:10—"You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together." There is a theological principle in view, and a practical reason for these commandments.

These verses seem odd to us, but they stem from the requirement that Israel be distinct from her pagan neighbors, and that Israel be obedient to YHWH in these symbolic acts which demonstrate the nation's holiness (or "set apartness" unto YHWH). But there are also practical benefits to obeying these laws as well. Two different kinds of draft animals do not plow effectively together, and the stronger animal actually weakens, and eventually does bodily harm to the weaker animal, while the weaker animal becomes an impediment to the stronger animal. Mixed crops (two kinds of plants) do not grow well together. They need different amounts of water and require different kinds of care. They ripen at different times, and so on. The theological point is that God's people cannot be allied with pagans in matters related to the kingdom of God, because at the most fundamental level of our lives (our world and life view), Christians and non-Christians have completely different values and perspectives. An alliance between Christians and non-Christians violates that principle of "set-apartness" and isn't going to work.

As for the civil kingdom, things are much different. Here, Christians and non-Christians must work together to see that civil justice is established and maintained, the peace is kept, and all citizens must work together to promote the common welfare of their society. This is Paul's point in Romans 13. Recall that in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul told the Corinthians not to judge those outside the church (or else Christians would have to leave the world). Non-Christians act like non-Christians. Not much of a surprise there. Rather, Paul says, the Corinthians are to avoid people inside the church, and who claim to be Christians, but who still think and act like pagans. This does not mean you avoid people who struggle with their sin. But it does mean that we avoid professing Christians who don't struggle with their sin and who see nothing wrong with indulging in it!

But in Christ's kingdom, Paul says, there can be no partnership with those apart from Christ. There is nothing in common between Christians and non-Christians. This is clear from Paul's contrasts between the law v. Spirit, Old Covenant v. New, sight v. faith, veiled heart and minds, in contrast to Christ lifting the veil, etc. In this particular case, Paul is reminding those in the Corinthian church who are challenging his authority and message, that they cannot ally themselves with pagan ways of thinking and doing to achieve "success." Using the Greek rhetorical style, using humor and telling tall-tales may attract a crowd, and show off the speaker's skills, but this is not preaching Christ and him crucified. The Corinthians are not to take upon themselves the yoke of this false teaching. It is certainly implied by Paul's comments here that the false teachers are not Christians, and that if the Corinthians heed these false teachers (by taking this yoke upon themselves), such an act is ultimately self-defeating.

But there is a broader application here as well. Paul is also reminding the Corinthians that non-Christians think and act differently than Christians. It is not a question of intelligence or education. It is a question of someone's presuppositions and perspective on life. Christians and non-Christians have different values, goals, and destinies. Non-Christians do not worship the Triune God. They do not see themselves as sinners in need of a Savior. They have not been reconciled to God through the cross of Jesus Christ. They remain blind to the things of God by the god of this age (Satan). They have veiled minds and hearts (to use the analogy which Paul used earlier).

Therefore, it is not a stretch to extend Paul's exhortation to include things like marriage and other close-knit partnerships which go beyond the normal course of daily life and interaction with non-Christians in the civil kingdom—like working with non-Christians, or living next door to them. Historically, Paul's exhortation has been taken to mean that Christians should not marry non-Christians, because, as Paul says, "what does righteousness have to do with lawlessness?" Or "what does light have to do with darkness?" The obvious answer is "nothing," because these things are opposites. Although Paul has said in 1 Corinthians that if two non-Christians are married, and one becomes a Christian, the Christian is not to leave the marriage, at the very least it is implied here that Christians should not marry a non-Christian (no matter how attractive, wealthy and famous they are, and no matter how much they love this person). The yoke (the bond) will not fit properly, and as Paul says it ought not be done.

Furthermore, when Paul contrasts Christ and Belial in verse 15, he is contrasting the Messiah and Satan. Belial was a common nickname used by Jews of Paul's day for the devil. It is also became a term subsequently used by Christians for the antichrist. The term implies treachery or worthlessness, and Paul uses it here to reinforce the practical differences between a Christian perspective on things and that of the Greco-Roman world (the latter just happens to be very much like the modern American perspective on things). Now, let us be clear here. Paul is not saying that non-Christians always do the work of Satan, or that all-non Christians are treacherous antichrists. Nor is Paul saying that Christians never do the work of the devil, and that Christians always are above such things as treachery and deceit. But Paul is saying that non-Christians think differently than Christian about eternal things. If Christians and non-Christian are yoked together in areas other than the general activities of the civil kingdom, it will not end well.

As Paul continues to make this series of contrasts, he concludes in verse 16, by returning to a prominent theme in 1 Corinthians—a contrast between the Christian faith and idolatry. Although this time Paul speaks in terms of the temple (the church) and idols, in this contrast we see again the divide between Christians and non-Christians. Paul reminds the Corinthians of that point he had hammered home back in 1 Corinthians 8-10, that in the New Covenant era there is no grand temple in Jerusalem where Christians go to visit God's house and his physical dwelling in the midst of his people. Rather, as Paul has said, we live in a different redemptive age—the New Covenant era, which is the age of the Holy Spirit. In this age, the church is the mystical body of Jesus Christ which is his temple. Each one of us are members of Jesus Christ's mystical body. We are, as Paul says, living stones, assembled together as the church of Jesus Christ in which the Spirit of God now dwells as we assemble together.

Paul's reference to idols in this context would have been perfectly clear to everyone of Paul's Corinthian readers. In virtually every Greco-Roman city of Paul's age, the center of the city would have had a raised and prominent temple devoted to Minerva, Jupiter, Zeus, Apollo (or whatever "god" was predominant in a given region). The city's marketplace and forum would be adjacent, surrounded by other pagan temples devoted to any "god" thought important by the locals. Like the Romans, the Greeks thought that these "gods" (or their spirits) were present in these temples. The priests identified with a particular deity would maintain the building, and people would go to these temples whenever they wanted something from the "god." They would stand outside, pray, make sacrifices, and leave offerings. These were thought to be holy spaces with a holy purpose. Only those "holy enough" (i.e., the priests) could enter.

So, when Paul states in verse 16, "*for we are the temple of the living God,*" he is laying the axe to the root of the pagan tree. God does not dwell in temples made by human hands. In the New Covenant era and age of the Holy Spirit his people (the church) are his temple. This is the primary biblical reason Paul gives as to why Christians are not to be unequally yoked with non-Christians. Christians compose God's temple,

living stones in which the Spirit of God dwells. When we assemble as Christ's church, God's Spirit is in our midst, ensuring (through word and sacrament) that all the benefits of Christ's are ours.

Once again, as we have seen Paul do throughout this letter, he now cites from three Old Testament passages to reinforce the point that this is what was anticipated under the Old Covenant. First, Paul cites from Leviticus 26:11-12 (or perhaps is paraphrasing Ezekiel 37:27). *"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.'"* In these texts, we find the great covenant promise that God will dwell in the midst of his people, and that God will walk among his own, in the sense of being present with them in union and communion. The promise that God's people of God will become his temple (dwelling) is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Notice too, Paul's reference to the fundamental covenant promise, "I will be their God and they shall be my people." This declaration is found throughout the Old Testament (most notably in Ezekiel 37:26-27, and Jeremiah 31:31-34, which was our Old Testament lesson). In the age of salvation (the "day") these wonderful covenant promises are a reality. In fact, in Revelation 21:3 when the new heaven and earth come down from heaven, we read that this event is the climax of this great covenant promise. *"I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'"* But the presence of God with his people in fulfillment of the covenant promise also demands holy living. For as we also read in Revelation 21:7-8: *"The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."* This is why believers and unbelievers cannot be yoked together.

In verse 17, Paul continues his citation of Old Testament texts. *"Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you."* The first three lines ("go out," "be separate" and "do not touch" are taken from Isaiah 52:11. In the original context of Isaiah's prophecy, God's people are called leave Babylon (and to separate themselves from the city), and in the process are to carry the holy vessels used in the temple back to Jerusalem.

Paul's point to the Corinthians should not to be read through the lens of a perfectionist view of sanctification—i.e., that Christians are to have nothing to do with non-Christians, or that Christians must separate themselves from those sins commonly identified by revivalists as things like smoking, drinking, gambling and dancing. That which God's people are not to touch, and from which they are to separate, are all things tied to pagan religion and idolatry. Since Christians are now the temple of God, indwelt by the blessed Holy Spirit, we must act appropriately. We cannot continue to live like pagans, and do the things pagans do—worship holy people, honor sacred places, or serve created things. It is not a stretch to say that the direct application for the Corinthians is that since they are the temple of Jesus Christ, they must separate themselves from the false teachers now operating in their midst.

In verse 18, Paul paraphrases yet another well-known Old Testament passage, a portion of Nathan's prophecy to David in 2 Samuel 7:14. *"And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."* In speaking the way he does (mentioning the father in relationship to both sons and daughters), Paul is very likely making the point that all believers (including men and women) are the temple of God, and are called to holy living—that "set apartness" from non-Christian ways of thinking and doing. The entire church (not just parts of it) is the temple of the living God.

God's sons and daughters should not only recognize that God is now in their midst, visiting them with his

long-promised salvation (through the ordinary means of grace in and through the power of the Holy Spirit), but that the entire church is called to act like the devoted children of God. The children of God (and the adopted sons and daughters of Jesus Christ) cannot continue to act like children of Belial.

If YHWH is our God, and we are his people, then, Paul says, we are to act like he is our God and we are his people! Paul says as much in his conclusion, verse 1 of chapter 7. *“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.”* Because God has given us all of these wonderful promises (which he has been enumerating since chapter 2), then we must use our bodies in a way which honors God. Not debasing them (by denying that the body is good), or seeking to indulge our every passion as do the pagans. Paul is warning his readers that we should indeed be afraid of God (terrified, in fact), and remember full-well that a day of judgment awaits. And because of this, we are to act in a way which reflects that holiness of conduct which God requires of us.

That said, we must not forget that Paul has just reminded us in chapter 5:17-21, that the death of Jesus reconciles God to us, and us to God. While we must fear God (and realize that he is a consuming fire), we must also never forget that the cross and mediation of Jesus provides the only safe way to approach God. By approaching God in the shadow of the cross with Jesus Christ as our advocate, there is nothing whatsoever to fear. This is because Jesus Christ has already borne the wrath of God for us and in our place. He intercedes for us, and he has nothing to fear from his heavenly father. Jesus has reconciled God to us, thereby allowing us to approach God freely and with confidence. But those who mock the cross of Christ because they think it foolishness or a scandal (specifically, those in Corinth undermining Paul), should have no confidence that they are reconciled to God. They see no need to heed God’s call to renounce paganism in all its forms, and separate from it. Because, this is how they think and act, they are in mortal danger. They have every reason to fear that day of judgment yet to come.

What do we say then, by way of application?

The first matter we must address is the question, “what does it mean, exactly, to not be unequally yoked with non-Christians?” And, “what does it mean to come out from them and be separate from them?” Well, it doesn’t mean that we must have no non-Christian friends, or that we move away from our non-Christian neighbors, and only live among Christians. It does mean that because we have different allegiances (us to Christ, and non-Christians to themselves), we have nothing in common with them when it comes to the kingdom of God. Paul commands us to renounce paganism and idolatry whenever we see it in the church. We cannot walk with one foot in paganism (or in the secularism of modern America) and with one foot in the church. We are either Christ’s or Belial’s. That is Paul’s point. This is why we must come out of false religion. We must separate from it. We must not “touch” or participate in pagan practices and rituals. It is because we are members of the New Covenant that Christians have no business marrying non-Christians, and why Christians should be very careful about entering any kind of relationship where someone’s ultimate values are an issue. “What fellowship has light with darkness?”

Paul’s stern warning grows out of the fact that all of God’s covenant promises are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The New Covenant is ratified in his shed blood. And because we have been purchased by Christ for God, and reconciled by God through the cross, the great covenant promise stands. “I will be your God and you will be my people.” God is in our midst, because we are his temple. His Spirit lives within us, ensuring that all of Christ’s saving benefits are ours. And because we are God’s dwelling, he walks among us. And his glorious covenant promise stands forever. “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”