Not to be yoked together with unbelievers

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Preacher: Nick Louw

[0:00] Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. This is the command that the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians begins our passage this morning.

As he's writing to this church, and we've been reading this letter so far now, at this point in chapter 6, about halfway through the letter, he writes this command, do not be yoked together with unbelievers.
And we've heard it, I think, as Christians, if you've been a Christian for any length of time, you've heard this verse quoted, but what exactly does it mean? And how do we put it into practice?
That's what I want us to think about this morning. As well as the other commands in this passage which support that first command. Like in verse 17, the Corinthians are told by Paul regarding unbelievers to, quote, go out from their midst and be separate from them.
I mean, that's quite a command. To what extent are we expected to follow that? To what extent are we expected to separate ourselves from those who don't follow Christ? Can we talk to them?
[1:03] Can we work with them? Can we hang out with them, socialize with them? I mean, I'm sure we'd agree we don't share the same values. We often don't have the same lifestyle.

But really, if you took this command in verse 17, literally to go out from them and be separate, we'd have to live in Christian communes. And many Christians overseas to this day actually do.
They completely take us literally and they go and live in little Christian villages. Which to me would be a nightmare, actually. Because we're just as sinful as anyone else.
But you do get those separate Christian communities. So where do we draw the line in separating ourselves from the outside world, in taking this command on board? Well, to answer that question, we need to understand just what the apostle is saying to the Corinthians here.
Why he's saying it in the context of the letter. And what this command to not be yoked together really means. And so that's what we're going to look at. Now the word translated to be yoked together is actually an agricultural term, referring to the yoke of oxen or cattle or beasts of burden.
[2:11] It's got nothing to do with an egg, by the way. And an egg yolk, it's a completely different spelling, even in the English. But a yoke, you see, in agriculture was the thing that went on the neck of the oxen that were pulling a wagon or a plow or something to keep them all together and to keep them pulling in the same direction.

And so basically to be yoked together means to be attached together in a common cause. That would be my translation of it. To be partners together for the same ultimate goal.
That's, I think, what Paul's getting at when he says being yoked together. But now what's interesting about Paul's instruction here is that the unbelievers he was saying not to be yoked with were actually people who were involved in the Corinthian church.
And we get that from the context. He wasn't so much talking about pagans on the outside, but he was talking about people who called themselves Christians on the inside.
So it's in a section of the letter all about the Corinthians accepting Paul's ministry and rejecting the influence of his opponents, the false teachers in Corinth and those who followed them.
[3:20] You would have known that if you'd been with us so far. So that's the context of what he's writing in this section. He's trying to support who he is as an ambassador of God, sent and commissioned by Jesus.

And he's trying to get them to listen to him and not listen to his opponents, his enemies, who were in the church teaching and leading the Corinthians astray. And so at the end of the last passage, you'll remember if you were here last week, he told them a positive instruction to open wide their hearts to him.

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You remember? But then this passage, the very next line, the very next verse, he tells them the negative instruction that goes with that. That is, don't be yoked together.
Don't partner with these opponents. And so this is not just out of the blue. He's not changing the subject. He's continuing what he was talking about last time. And in talking about his opponents who they shouldn't be partnering with and yoking together in a common cause with, he uses the strongest terms for them by calling them unbelievers.
And that's quite a strong thing to say about people in the church professing to be Christians. But he, you know, Paul, you've got to love him. He calls it like it is. And it's a good thing to be reminded of.
[4:38] We saw already last week in the previous passage, just how people who call themselves Christians aren't necessarily saved. They can believe in vain if they're not actually living in line with what they believe.

And that's what Paul is saying about his opponents here. But the problem is that these people can still be in prominent positions within the church. They can still be in influential positions within the church, like they were in Corinth.
And so Paul wants the Corinthians to stop this partnership they have with these teachers and their followers. Because, and here's the first major point we should take from what Paul is saying here. The biggest threats to the church come not from the outside, but from the inside. The biggest threats to the church actually come from the inside.
From those who look like Christians, and yet their goals and their values and their motives are completely opposed to that of Jesus Christ. And we don't have to look far to see examples of that, do we?
[5:40] We've seen quite a few recent examples in our own country. The church has been in the headlines recently, hasn't it? In the newspapers, on the internet, you've read a lot about the church, but for all the wrong reasons.

And the truth is, the church will always be in the headlines for all the wrong reasons, because Satan loves bringing God's church into disrepute, and he's been doing so ever since day one.
And he's having a field day, it seems, these days. So first with the resurrection hoax, you may have heard about that, that's been in the news recently, which is just the latest in a string of fraudulent pastors in South Africa claiming miraculous powers and getting people to do crazy, stupid things.
And then you've also, more recently, on the other side of the church spectrum, you've got with the conservative Dutch Reformed Church. You may have heard recently, just last week, the Dutch Reformed Church was ordered by the courts to reverse a decision not to allow same-sex marriages, which, of course, caused a whole lot of concern about the interference of the state in church affairs, and it created a very unhealthy precedent, and it brought into question the freedom of religion.
But what's interesting, if you look into that story, what's interesting about the Dutch Reformed ruling is that it wasn't the state who initiated the complaint against the church.
[7:01] You know who it was? It was members of the church. It was people from inside the church. The resistance came from within by people who call themselves Christians, who are fully-fledged members of the church.

And so, do you see, in all these cases, the greatest threat to the church, what Paul's trying to tell the Corinthians, actually comes from within. And that's why Paul's instructions here are not so much about the Corinthians separating themselves from paganism outside.
I mean, that goes without saying, and we'll see in a bit that this passage also implies that, but what Paul's saying here is first and foremost about them separating from those within the church who are not actually part of them, even if they look like one of them, because that is the greatest danger the church faces.
And such separation is necessary, it's encouraged in Scripture, and it's what don't be yoked together really means. But then what Paul does next is to support this idea by showing just how different believers really are from unbelievers, even if they look the same on the outside.
Inside, for a number of very significant reasons, believers and unbelievers are completely different.
And that's what Paul is highlighting in verse 14 to 16.
[8:27] He lists the five major differences that he thinks of between believers and unbelievers. So he says this, Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.

For one, what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Two, what fellowship can light have with darkness? Three, what harmony is there between Christ and Belial? That's just another

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name for Satan, with a Hebrew root.
I won't get into it. Four, what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? That's kind of lost in translation. In translation, the literal, he says, What share, what portion does an unbeliever share with the believer?
He's talking about their hope, what they're looking forward to, the idea of portion in the land, what is their inheritance. And then five, what agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?
Now, we don't really have time to dig into each of these, but what he's saying here is if you're really a believer, you are far more different from your non-Christian colleague or next-door neighbor or family member than you might think, for all these reasons.
[9:35] For example, in terms of what moral authority you're under, Christians are under God's moral absolutes. Christians place themselves under God's law, while unbelievers think they sit in authority over God's law, that they can pick and choose, and they can kind of interpret Scripture how they see fit to suit their lifestyles.

That's really at the heart of Paul's distinction between righteousness and wickedness. In his mind and in God's mind, true wickedness is not so obvious.
Wickedness is not just those people who are serial killers and drooling and walking around with crazed looks in their eyes. Wickedness could look very decent, can look very law-abiding in terms of secular society, but wicked people in God's mind are those who think they can reinterpret and select a moral code that suits their lifestyle.
That's really wickedness. Just like those who support gay marriage are doing today. They're sitting in authority over God's law. That's what they're doing. Rather than submitting to God's law, those who say it's fine for a man to get married to a man or a woman to get married to a woman are taking God's instructions about his design for marriage and sex and completely ignoring that and reinterpreting it to suit their lifestyle.
That is not sitting under the authority of God's word. That is sitting over God's word in authority, thinking that we know better than God. And that is wickedness, according to the Bible.
[11:12] So that's the first difference Paul mentions. As I said, we can't get into each in detail, but other differences that Paul mentions here between believers and unbelievers are what Christians are able to see as opposed to non-Christians, light versus darkness, what we've been revealed and how that changes our outlook on life and how different that is to someone who hasn't got that light from Scripture, from Revelation, who believers are in submission to, who is their master, Christ or Satan, because it's one of the two.

We're always a slave to someone. Paul makes that quite clear in Romans. We're not in control of ourselves, our desires. We don't decide those. We're always a slave to someone.
And who we're a slave to, our master is completely different if we're believers as opposed to unbelievers. Also, what believers are hoping for, that portion thing that Paul mentioned, where they're storing their treasure.
Because if your hope is in the life to come, Jesus teaches you will store your treasure in the life to come. Your focus, your resources will be there, not here. And that's what Paul means in the end of verse 15 when he says, what portion do they share or what do they have in common?
He's alluding to the hope in the land to come. And then finally, the object of their worship is different. What they value in life, that's what the word worship in English comes from, worth-ship.
[12:38] What we attach worth to in our lives. And Paul's saying, people will either attach worth to God, symbolized by his temple, the place of revelation and worship of the true God, or they will attach worth to idols, things that we've made, created things rather than the creator.

So we'll either worship the one or the other. And so what Paul's saying here is that people with these vastly different values and focuses in life can't possibly make common cause together.
They can't possibly be yoked together in any significant way if they're so vastly different. Okay, but now before we just look at just what that means, practically for our daily lives and our relationships with unbelievers, before we look at that, I want us to see one more reason Paul gives in this passage as to why these Corinthians had to make sure they were separated from those who didn't actually share their faith in Christ.
And it was all because of the place and the importance of holiness in a Christian's life. Another point we often neglect to think about.
But look at how Paul goes on halfway through verse 16. I'll read it. He goes, For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said, I will live with them and walk among them and I will be their God

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and they will be my people.
[14:05] Therefore, come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing and I will receive you and I will be a father to you and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.

Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.
So, this is a very interesting passage because Paul is quoting from no less than five different Old Testament references. Remember, he used to be a rabbi and he knew his Old Testament really well.
And here he's quoting a number of places in the Old Testament which all relate to God's promises to his people when they were in exile in Babylon because of their sin. If you know about the history of Israel, they entered the promised land after their exodus from Egypt but then they went into just a spiral of dissent and moral decay under worse and worse kings.
We read that in Judges and 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. And then eventually, God punished them through sending Assyria and Babylon to invade and take over and take people into exile for 40 years.
[15:21] And what's interesting, of course, is all of that was prophesied by prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and stuff before it happened. And that, you know, that's one of the reasons we can trust that the Bible is in fact the Word of God.

You just read this stuff and you read these prophets that were, that wrote centuries before these things happened and yet they happened exactly like it said. All these prophecies came true. But anyway, the point is that these Israelites were living in Babylon amongst their pagan overlords.
And these are God's promises to them while they were living in Babylon. And through the prophets God promised them that one day they will be freed from that oppression and they will again live in the land.
That's essentially the heart of his promises to his people in the Old Testament prophets that they will be freed from their oppression and again they will live in the good land that God is setting apart for them.
But it'll be different to how it was before Babylon came and before they were taken into exile because we see in these references Paul quotes more than just living in the land God promised that he himself will live with them and he will dwell in their midst and they will be part of his family.
[16:48] Verse 18 I will be a father to you and you will be my sons and daughters. This is talking about a completely new relationship with God that people had never experienced before. And then we read on in the Bible and we realize that all of these prophecies that God's people had been waiting for begin to be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ to earth who John describes as God dwelling in our midst just like God promised his people.

The word became flesh and dwelt among us John says in the first chapter of his gospel. And so you see Jesus coming to earth was God starting to free his people from the oppression and to bring them back home except what we realize is it was talking about a much greater oppression than just you know the Israelites being freed from Babylon.
They're just talking about people all over the world being freed from the slavery of sin and death and being brought home not just to a land a portion of land in this fallen world but to a new creation where God will dwell forever with his people and they will be his family and they will enjoy him and his gifts and his blessings without limit forever.
That is the life that God has planned for people not this life that is passing away and painful. That liberation from sin is what Jesus achieved when he died on the cross.
You see Israel being liberated from Babylon which happened through the Persian Empire by the way that was just a symbol of what God was going to do for people all over the world when Jesus died on the cross to free us from the penalty of our sins when we trust in him we are made clean we are made righteous we are freed from the wrath of God that we deserve for our sins and rebellion against him.
[18:49] We are freed from that and we are liberated out of the control of sin and we are given the hope and the access into the land into a new creation into a new world that God wants us to be in.

So that's what you know that's why the gospel that's why Jesus dying on the cross is central to the entire Bible because that's what it unlocks that was the whole plan from the beginning for God to

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really liberate his people.
And so what Paul does is he takes these verses and he applies them directly to the Corinthians the Christians in Corinth and in fact whoever comes to faith in Jesus Christ these are God's promises to you and read them and enjoy them because they're profound.
This primarily these promises here weren't to the nation of Israel primarily they were to you if you're a believer. God promises that he will live with you and walk among us and we will be the people of God and he will be a father to us and we will be his sons and daughters.
That's what these promises are talking about that you have a home that is not this one where God will dwell in all his glory and you will be part of God's eternal family forever.
[20:16] But now I want you to notice something so important about these Old Testament promises Paul quotes. There's a structure to them at the end of each sorry at each end of the string of quotes is a promise a great promise an amazing promise to God's people but right in the middle right in the middle there's a condition a call from God to his people verse 17 therefore come out from them and be separate says the Lord touch no unclean thing and I will receive you.

this was a quote taken from Isaiah chapter 52 which is a beautiful passage and I've asked after the sermon I've asked Alan to read it for us but it's a beautiful passage in which God calls his exiled people out of their sleep out of their stupor having got comfortable for 40 years in a foreign land because Babylon was a pretty decent place to live have you ever heard of the hanging gardens of Babylon you know it was it was it was kind of the top of civilization at that time and the people had got comfortable there it actually turned out not so bad living with the Babylonians even though they were under their control they got to like it and Isaiah 52 is a call to the exiled people to wake up awake awake oh Zion it starts and shake off their dust and leave their captors and become
God's people again that's what the call is and then what God does to the Israelites living in Babylon he allows them to do that as I said through the Persian Empire who came and gave the Babylonians a good thumping and enabled the Israelites to leave the place of captivity that they've been living for the past 40 years but their temptation at that point even after the Persians came was to stay there because they had found a home there it had become home to them and so God tells them here in Isaiah 52 in order for them to enjoy his promises in the land to come they first need to exit the land they're in in order for the Israelites to go to their real home they needed to make sure Babylon wasn't their home and they needed to leave it well what is Babylon today because Babylon in the Bible is always a symbol for something bigger than just that ancient nation
Babylon today is the world and its values and its way of life that it promotes that we see promoted and glorified through movies and books and media the world and its values is today is Babylon but for the people of God this is not our home and those are not our values and so if we are citizens of the new world to come if these promises are actually for us if we are members of the family of God who have God's promises in the gospel because of what Jesus did for us and we trust that and he is our king and we are following him then what we need to do now is get up and separate ourselves from this world that's what this is a call to but then that brings us back to our original question what does that separation look like in our daily lives what does it look like to come out from them and not be yoked together with unbelievers well I think it's important first to say what it doesn't mean it doesn't mean that we completely cut ourselves off from the world and its people you know if Jesus and the disciples had done that we would have never heard the gospel the world needs us more than it knows because we have the message of
God's ambassadors God's peace terms with the sinful humanity who are under his wrath we have the peace terms and we can't we can't keep that to ourselves the world needs us and we have a responsibility to it so this doesn't mean separating ourselves from the world and it doesn't mean not working in the same business as unbelievers scripture has many examples in fact and instructions about working for those who are not in the faith working with those who are not in the faith in such a way to be a witness to them through our work and our work ethic we witness the gospel it also doesn't mean not to share in secular customs like secular holidays and cultural gatherings I'm sure you're looking forward to your public holiday on what Thursday and it's good to be part of our culture as long as those cultural customs are not immoral in fact in 1 Corinthians Paul encourages us to adapt ourselves to fit the context that we're living in to become all things for all people he says so that we can effectively reach out to them not to be aloof not to like look down our noses at people that's not what it means and the last thing

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[25:23] I want to mention about what this doesn't mean is it doesn't mean to break off a marriage where one person has become a Christian and the other is not again we see this in 1 Corinthians where Paul specifically talks about marriage and he's answering a request from some of the Corinthian Christians who wrote to him and they said look some of us have become Christians but our spouses haven't become Christians can we have your permission to divorce them and marry Christians and Paul says no he writes back in 1 Corinthians on your spouse and your children and so what it means to not be yoked together with unbelievers doesn't mean any of those things and so what does it mean then to not be of common cause together to not be yoked together well while we're on the topic of marriage it does mean don't get married to an unbeliever if you're a believer because marriage is a partnership marriage is a yoking together

I'm sure you'd agree if you're married and again while this command isn't specifically about marriage Paul's not talking about the topic of marriage here he talks about that in 1 Corinthians and there he does specifically forbid Christians to marry unbelievers because this is the same principle the principle is why bind yourself to someone with a completely different set of values and a different outlook of life and heading in a completely different direction in eternity what is the point that's just going to cause unwanted destructive friction in a marriage and what are the children what about the children you know what do they think where do they go and so let me reiterate this is not a command to divorce to separate a marriage that already exists because there's good that can be done there and God helps and supports and commands people in those kind of situations to represent Christ but it is a command saying that it is absolutely foolish and against
God's will to get married to a non-Christian if you're a believer to make that decision so that's one of the things that being not being yoked together means another thing I think it means not to be yoked together is to avoid significant financial business partnerships with an unbeliever like a 50-50% ownership in a new venture where you share control I think that's a form of yoking together that kind of business partnership because the reason a Christian a hope enters a venture where they can make money where they invest is for the glory of God so it can be an investment in God's kingdom treasures in heaven an investment in gospel growth an investment in the growth of the church but that won't be the goals of his partner or her partner if they're an unbeliever so I think that is a form that is something to be avoided again this verse isn't specifically about business partnerships but I think it's an implication of what
Paul's saying mostly though this is talking about questions of faith and morality and that we can't partner in things like for example interfaith services and pretend like we've got common goals because we don't we're serving completely different masters it also means you know the separation of the church and state which the Dutch reform saga in the news is threatening because the church and the state have completely different goals you can't yoke together and be of common cause but then finally and primarily the main way we separate ourselves from our Babylon from our surrounding culture is through a serious and intentional pursuit of holiness in our lives day to day which Paul means at the end there 7 verse 1 therefore since we have these promises dear friends let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit perfecting holiness out of reverence for
God because you see holiness is the mark of God's family it's the family likeness it's the nature of the world to come and so one of the main ways we show that our home is there is to live out holy lives here to live out lives that are characteristic of that world even while we're still in this world as God says in Isaiah to touch no unclean thing and Paul says to purify that which contaminates body and spirit which means to avoid sin and temptation in all areas of life inwardly and outwardly not engaging for example in the lifestyle of this world of sex before marriage just because the culture says it's okay and glorifies it it's not okay it's a sin no matter how normal it looks it means not following the deceptive business practices of secular business just because everyone else does it and it's the normal thing to do it means not watching things or reading things that are going to compromise your growth in holiness and your conscience is telling you that it's dangerous to watch or to read it's avoiding those things because listen again to what
[31:01] God says in this in this passage in Isaiah he says awake awake Zion clothe yourself with strength put on your garments of splendor or your beautiful garments your beautiful clothing those clothes that show them to be God's people what are those clothes what are our beautiful garments I'll tell you it's our holiness that is the beautiful clothing that we can put on even now because of what Jesus did for us on the cross to sanctify us to justify us brothers and sisters holiness is not

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something we reluctantly have to do it's something we get to put on because of what Jesus did for us and it's beautiful holiness is more attractive than the most extravagant dress or Armani suit that you can think of you know people spend so much effort worrying about what they look like today people spend so much effort trying to keep up with the trends and the fashions and worrying whether they're wearing the latest fashions you know

God's people should be concerned not with that God's people should be concerned with wearing the fashion of the kingdom the garments of holiness did you know in 1 Timothy Paul instructs Christian women how to dress he's very adamant on how they should dress he says this I quote the women should adorn themselves not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes but with good deeds which are right and fitting for God's people holiness is the dress code for the new creation and so those are the clothes that we get to put on even now and so let's let's take off the clothes of Babylon let's turn away from this world and its values and its idols and what it puts worth in what it loves and chases after and let's go out from their midst and be separate from them let's wake up like Isaiah calls us to do and put on the clothes of holiness the beautiful clothes appropriate to who we really are as we prepare to live in the new world that God is calling us home to let's pray
Lord we do thank you for this call we thank you for your promises to your people that are fulfilled through Jesus Christ and what he did when he died for our sins we thank you that you call us to be your people and we thank you that not only do you call us to holiness but you you give us the ability to pursue holiness through the Holy Spirit and so we pray Lord help us to value and pursue holiness help us in our pursuit of holiness to be separate from the values of this world that will help us to awake and shake off the dust of Babylon and live the lives that you've called us to live and that we will live in eternity so that we can be a light to the nations and we pray this in Jesus name amen in happen in anos amen h RH
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