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Biblical Perspectives

THE REAL
MEANING OF
BEING UNEQUALLY
YOKED

G . M I C H A E L
COCORIS

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THE REAL MEANING OF BEING UNEQUALLY YOKED

2 Corinthians 6:14

A gentleman who heard our radio broadcast, recently wrote me a letter, and he said, "The question of being unequally yoked has puzzled me for sometime now. It wasn't until recently, though, that I became personally affected. About a month ago, I met a young woman who does not consider herself to be a Christian. I must honestly say that I am attracted to her. We've had several conversations about God and she has expressed that she is seeking the truth and an understanding of who God is. Personally, I think that is good news. I told her I would like to encourage her to pursue seeking the truth and that is all a Christian, or anyone else for that matter, could ask. My dilemma is with 2 Corinthians 6:14, and the interpretation that has been rendered from several well known pastors, that is, neither date nor have a relationship with unbelievers."

He is commenting on the fact that Christians use 2 Corinthians 6:14 to teach you should not be married

THE REAL MEANING OF BEING UNEQUALLY YOKED

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to an unbeliever. I would say that verse and that statement is as well known in Christian circles as any verse of the Bible. When you become a Christian, you learn John 3:16. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him, shall not perish, but have everlasting life." Shortly after that you learn the verse, "And don't be unequally yoked together." You might not know the reference but you know the statement.

Everybody assumes it means you should not be married to an unbeliever. Is that what that verse means? There are other applications like, "Don't enter into a business relationship or partnership, with somebody who isn't a believer." Is that what Paul had in mind when he wrote that verse? Does that verse apply to business partnerships?

INTERPRETATION

Look at 2 Corinthians 6:14 again: "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness. And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?"

Verse 14 says, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers." This is taken from the command in Deuteronomy 22, that a donkey and an ox should not be yoked together. Paul is saying

not to be unequally yoked with an unbeliever. He then explains why with a series of questions.

"What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness?" Those two things are antithetical. They are opposites!

"What communion has light with darkness?" They are incongruous with each other. Total light and total darkness cannot even exist together. They are complete opposites, so he asks what communion there is between them.

"What accord has Christ with Belial?" Belial is another word for Satan. Satan and Christ are opposites. They are diametrically opposed to each other. There is no consent between them on accomplishing anything.

"What part has a believer with an unbeliever?" The word translated "part" simply means to share. What is it a believer and an unbeliever share? His answer as in all the other questions is "nothing." There is no common ground between a believer or an unbeliever.

"What agreement has the temple of God with idols?" There is no agreement. There is no collaboration between a pagan, heathen temple and the temple of God.

There are five such contrasts but they all say one basic thing. He says, "What fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness, what communion has light with darkness," and so forth. His point is, there is no companionship, no communion, no consent, no common ground, no collabo-

ration between a believer and an unbeliever. Or to put it all simply, they are complete opposites.

Thus, the text is not saying, to be unequally yoked with an unbeliever, because a believer and an unbeliever are exact opposites.

What does all this mean? What is the interpretation of this passage? What does Paul have in mind? In what area would you be yoked with an unbeliever? Look at the context of these verses, then look at the verses themselves.

Look at chapter 6, verse 11. "Oh Corinthians, we have spoken openly to you, our heart is wide open." Verse 13, "You also be open." Chapter 7, verse 2, "Open your hearts to us."

It is unmistakable that Paul starts out saying, I want you to be open to us because we have been open to you. Then all of a sudden, almost abruptly, dramatically, he makes the statement, "Don't be unequally yoked together with an unbeliever." He fully develops that through chapter 7, verse 1, and then he returns to the concept of "open your hearts to us" in chapter 7, verse 2.

So, in the context, Paul was saying, you are drifting away from us. Now I've been very open to you. He talked very openly about the fact that he made a promise to them and didn't keep it. He explained why. He'd been charged with lacking integrity. He'd been open in discussing that. Just prior to this passage in chapter 6, verses 1-10, he was open about all that he had gone through in the ministry.

So, whatever this means, it is related somehow to their relationship with the apostle Paul. That is very clear from the context. In other words, they are not being yoked up with Paul, they are being yoked up with an unbeliever somehow.

Now look specifically at a couple of verses in the text. In verse 15, he says "What accord has Christ with Belial?" That's Christ and the Devil. That's a religious issue. Look at verse 16. He says, "What agreement has the temple of God with idols?" So in the overall context, he's talking about their relationship to him and in the text itself, he's talking about religious affiliations. That's why he says, "What part has a believer with an unbeliever?" The word part means to share.

What common ground do we share with an unbeliever? We share a lot with them. We both breathe the same air, we both eat the same kinds of food, we both share the same country and the same currency. But if you understand that the point is, "What do we share *religiously*", the answer is, *nothing* because they don't know Christ.

Both from the context and the text, my conclusion is that the subject in this passage has to do with religious affiliation.

In chapter 11, verse 4, he says this, "For if he who comes, preaches another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit, which you have not received, or a different gospel, which you have not accepted, you may well put up with it."

This verse identifies the nature of a major problem going on in this epistle, mainly, that there were false teachers at Corinth. Paul is saying in this verse, "You're putting up with them."

What were these false teachers teaching? A different Jesus, i.e., one other than the One the Scriptures present. The Scripture presents Jesus Christ as the virgin born, sinless, miracle-working, Son of God, who died on the cross as the complete payment for sin, and he arose from the dead.

They were also teaching a different gospel. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says the gospel is, "Jesus Christ died for our sins, according to the Scripture, and then He arose again the third day according to the Scriptures." So, if somebody preaches any other message than that, he is a false teacher.

If he denies the Trinity, if he denies the deity of Christ, if he denies the substitutionary death of Christ, if he denies the bodily resurrection of Christ, he is an unbeliever!

2 Corinthians 6, in the context of the passage, and in the context of the book, is talking about being unequally yoked with religious, false teachers, and not being yoked up with the apostle Paul.

APPLICATION

Question: Does this apply to marriage? If I were an airplane pilot, I'd come on and say we're about to encounter some turbulence and you'd bet-

ter fasten your seat belt. I'm about to challenge something you've believed all your Christian life. Did Paul have marriage in mind when he wrote this? Answer: My conclusion is that when Paul wrote this passage he did *not* have marriage in mind. Now, we're not out of the turbulence. Keep your seat belt fastened. Let me prove from the passage that what I just stated is correct.

Look at the passage, verse 17. "Therefore, come out from among them and be separate says the Lord." That's Paul's conclusion. If this passage is talking about marriage, verse 17 is saying, get a divorce because you are married to an unbeliever.

Look at verse 1 of chapter 7; here's another conclusion: "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

If Paul had marriage in mind, then he is saying that the unsaved partner is filthy. He would be saying that you have got to divorce an unsaved mate. But in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says, "But to the rest I, not the Lord, say, if any brother has a wife who does not believe and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her, and the woman who has a husband who does not believe, if she is willing to live with him, let her not divorce him" (1 Cor. 7:12).

In 1 Corinthians, Paul says, if you are married to an unbeliever don't get a divorce. He certainly didn't write 2 Corinthians which followed in a short period of time, perhaps within six months, to

say, Oh yes, and if you're married to an unbeliever, if you are unequally yoked, divorce that person.

I inadvertently stumbled upon something as I was studying this passage that I found very fascinating. Dr. Earl Radmacher, who is now Chancellor of Western Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary in Portland, Oregon, and for many years the president, years ago attended Dallas Theological Seminary and received a master's degree and a doctor's degree from Dallas. He wrote his master's thesis on 2 Corinthians, chapter 6:14, and the context around it. One of his conclusions is that Paul didn't have marriage in mind when he wrote this passage. He was talking about religious affiliation.

THE QUESTION ABOUT MARRIAGE

The great question is: "Well, then, can a believer be married to an unbeliever?"

Let me begin by saying to you that I must confess that I have, prior to studying 2 Corinthians, been known to quote 2 Corinthians 6:14 and say that it means a believer shouldn't be married to an unbeliever. I'd always heard that verse used in that way didn't know any better until I started going through 2 Corinthians. As a matter of fact, that's the reason I am so insistent that I go through a book and stay in the context, because when I don't, it's really easy for me to preach what I think instead of what the text says.

I've been guilty of doing that on this verse! I remember years ago using the verse in Matthew 19:6 which says, "What God has joined together let not man put asunder," and pointing out that "joined together" in the Greek text is the Greek word "yoke." The word unequally yoked is a cognate word in 2 Corinthians 6:14.

Does the Bible teach that a believer can marry an unbeliever. The answer to that is a categorical "No!" The Bible teaches that you should *not* marry an *unbeliever*. 1 Corinthians 7:39 says, "A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives, but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, but only in the Lord." If you're a widow, Paul says, you can marry anybody you wish, but only in the Lord. That verse says God has put a restriction on marriage and the restriction is that you should only marry a believer.

Furthermore, there is a whole host of passages in the Old Testament that illustrate that we are not to marry unbelievers, because God did not want the ancient Jews to marry non-Jews. That is abundantly clear from many passages in the Scriptures. But the one statement in the New Testament that says it as clearly as any I know is 1 Corinthians 7:39.

In the vast majority of cases when a believer marries an unbeliever it affects the believer. One of the reasons that God wants you to marry a believer, is He knows if you marry an unbeliever it could, and probably will, affect your relationship with Him. That's the problem!

Solomon is the classic biblical illustration of someone who married pagan wives and it eventually took his heart away from the Lord.

In modern times, it was a lady named Olivia. She grew up in a Christian home and confessed to know Jesus Christ. But she fell in love with a man named Mark. He was not a believer, but he went to church with her and they got married. At first, he even prayed at the table and he attended the church, but after they had been married a short time, his church attendance dropped off, and eventually he said to her, "I have to say to you, I do not believe the Bible." She knew he wasn't a Christian. He became more outspoken in his insistence that he couldn't accept the Scripture as the Word of God.

Years later, they had a crisis in their life, and if I recall correctly, the crisis was the death of their daughter. Mark, her husband, his last name was Twain, as in Mark Twain, said to his wife, Olivia, "If it would comfort you, why don't you lean on the Christian faith?" She turned to him and said, "I can't!" Her marriage had so affected her spiritually, she had drifted away from the Lord. That is the reason God says, "Don't marry an unbeliever."

Someone will say, but I know a Christian that married an unbeliever and he is doing very well. The believer is still following the Lord. There are cases like that. So let me mention something that I don't think is necessarily scriptural but a practical observation. Many people who have married

unbelievers have said the chances are very great that it will adversely affect your children.

Years ago, when I was still an itinerant evangelist, a lady who had gone to church all of her life, trusted Christ in the middle of a sermon. I was explaining the gospel, and she got saved and told me about it immediately afterwards. Years later she told me how being married to an unbeliever affected her marriage. I've never forgotten just listening to the lady. It broke my heart. Her husband was not religious but his mother was. So he insisted that his kids go to his mother's church which did not preach the gospel. She loved her husband dearly but what it did to her kids nearly killed her.

Now hear me, if you're not married, don't, please don't, I beg you, don't marry an unbeliever! I've seen some Christian girls who wanted to get married so badly, that after a few years when it looks like they are not going to get married, marry an unbeliever. Don't do that! If you're a single girl, there's something worse than being single! It's being married to the wrong person. So, while I want to make the point that 2 Corinthians 6:14 is not talking about marriage (I am simply trying to be accurate with the text), I do not mean to even remotely imply that the Scripture would warrant you marrying an unbeliever, because it doesn't.

Now all of this has raised a few other questions like: Does this apply to business partnerships? Again, I would say that the context does not talk about that directly. However, there are some

warnings about things like that in the Scripture. I remember discussing this with some people older and wiser in the Lord than I.

A professor told me once that the principle, was that you should avoid any relationship where the believer is responsible for moral decisions, and those moral decisions could be vetoed by the unbeliever. The Scripture does give you the responsibility to make moral decisions. You dare not allow others to make binding moral decisions for you, especially an unbeliever.

1 Corinthians 15:33 says do not be deceived; evil company corrupts good habits. Obviously, you are to influence unsaved people. There is nothing wrong in befriending an unsaved person, but when the unsaved person begins to affect you and influence you more than you influence him, that is when you have to draw the line. Frankly, I think a business partnership puts you in a situation that may force you to compromise a moral principle. It ought to be avoided.

To sum up: 2 Corinthians 6:14 does not directly apply to marriage; however, the Scripture does teach that you shouldn't marry an unbeliever. Why did I take a whole message to say this? To make a point. You must, you must, you must take the Bible in context.

The other reason I wanted to do this was to say to you, "Don't be unequally yoked with unbelievers." That's what 2 Corinthians 6:14 says, and what Paul had in mind was false teachers. I think the modern

application of that in context is the cults. As I explained from 2 Corinthians 11:4, it refers to anyone who would deny the doctrine of Christ or the gospel. Don't be unequally yoked with them in your religious affiliation. In passing, I should say, and don't marry a non-Christian, but if you're already married to one, stay married.

Paul argues in 2 Corinthians 6 that you shouldn't be unequally yoked because a Christian and a non-Christian are blatantly the opposite of each other. They are completely contradictory, so you would never put the two together. In a sense that applies to religious affiliations, marriage, and business partnerships.

Years ago I read a story about the Hollywood Branch of the American Cancer Society joining with a tennis tournament to sponsor a benefit. After they had publicized it, putting out notices and tickets, that chapter of the American Cancer Society discovered, to their chagrin, that the tennis tournament was being sponsored by a major cigarette manufacturer. So posters went out advertising the fund raiser for the American Cancer Society, picturing a man with a tennis racket in one hand, and a cigarette in the other!

If that strikes you as incongruous then you've got the message: "Don't be unequally yoked with an unbeliever!"

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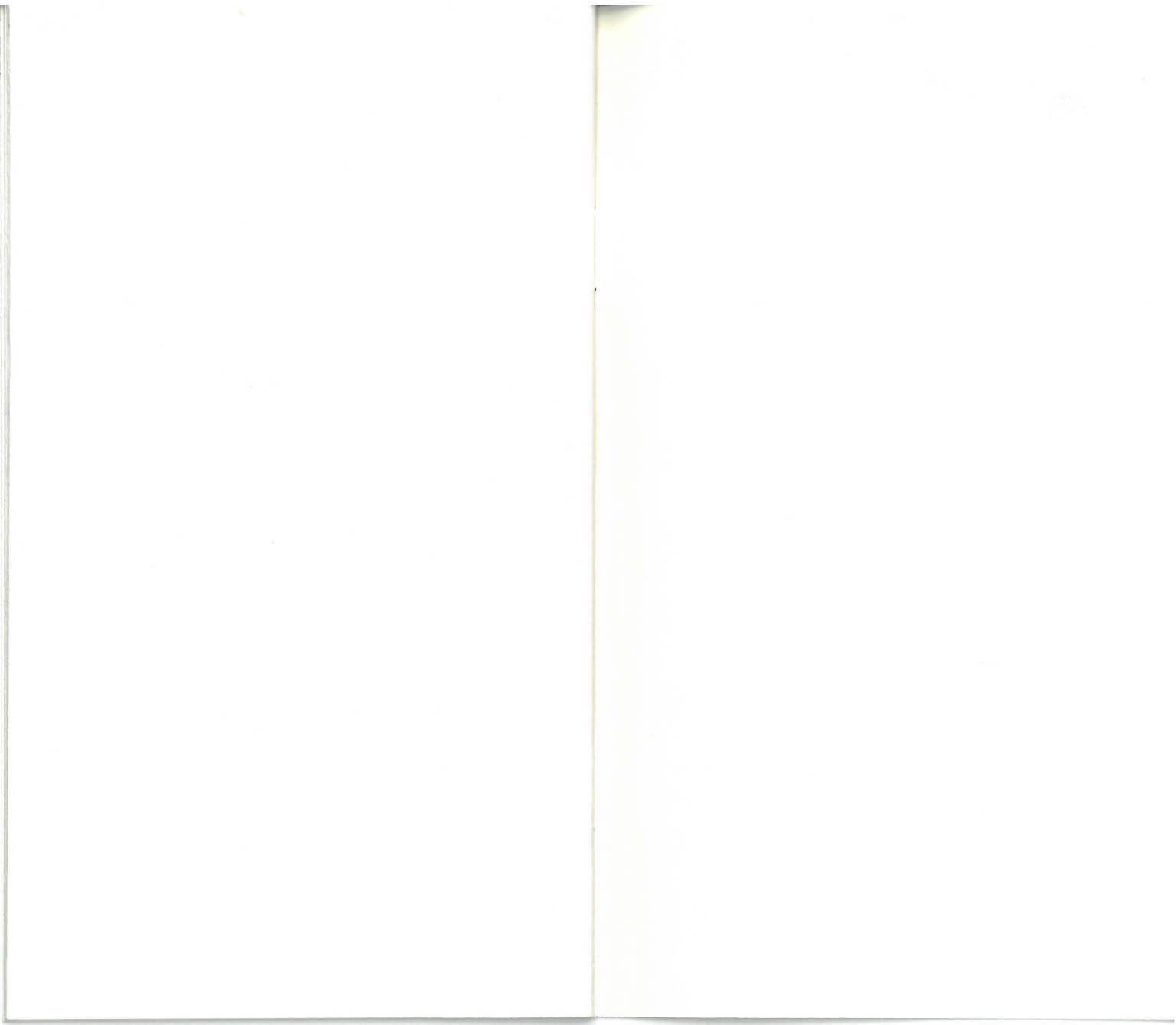
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