

The High Calling of God's People

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[0 : 00] Now, I want to start today by just saying that throughout the history of the church, there is a question that constantly pops up, an important question which many people wrestle with, and that's the question at the top of your outline.

Question of what the relationship of the church is with the world. I'll put it another way, how do God's people interact with the world? Should it, for example, keep up with the changes in the world so as to stay relevant?

How should the church be a part of the world it lives in? Or should it separate from the world? These are the sort of questions that actually the church has been asking and wrestling with throughout the ages.

And I raise these questions because that's where we're headed with the application today. What is the place of God's people in the world? What's God's big vision for it?

That's where we're aiming to get to. And so I've given you the destination from the get-go. Now, this passage itself wouldn't answer the whole question, but I believe it's got much to say in terms of giving us an insight into it.

[1 : 16] And so as we heard the passage read just, I think we probably get the sense that the thrust of what is being taught by Paul is not actually that hard to work out.

I think the challenge for us tonight is how to apply it well. So let's begin at verse 14 where we read, Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.

As I said, it's not too hard, is it, to work out what the main point is.

The instruction at the start is plain enough. Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. And many of you will know that this is a farming image.

The yoke is that thing which you place between the two oxen to plow the field together. So not to be yoked with unbelievers is an instruction not to be joined with them with the aim of working together for a common cause.

[2 : 32] Why not? Well, Paul gives us the answer in the rationale or the rationale in a series of rhetorical questions showing that really the reason is because the church has nothing in common with the world.

They are poles apart. They are going in different directions. And so unlike the saying, opposites in this case does not attract. So the church, for example, is righteous, pursuing God's will, whereas the world is wicked.

Not wicked in the sense of doing evil things like killing or stealing, although that happens in this world. But more the idea that the world is following an agenda that's opposed to God.

It's disobedient to God's will. It's wicked in the sense that it has its own goals and aims that has a total disregard for God who is creator.

Thus, the church should not be yoked with the world because they have very different goals and aims. Well, next, then Paul says the church is living in the light.

[3 : 43] The light of God's truth, which the world does not and therefore is living in darkness. The world has no understanding of the way God has created it, nor its design, God's design for it.

Now, with the next pair, the word Belial is probably unclear to many of us. It's actually not found anywhere else in the Bible. It sort of sounds like maybe Beelzebub, prince of demons, maybe. Or some scholars have made reference to a word in the Old Testament, a Hebrew word, which sounds similar and has the meaning of nothing. And so they probably gather that during Paul's day, this was maybe a term that was used to personify evil.

Just as Christ is a person, Belial is sort of like a person that personifies evil. It could be another name for the devil, perhaps. And many of you will know, for example, that probably not so much

now, but a few decades ago, the word Lucifer was quite a common term that's used to describe the devil.

Except Lucifer, again, is not in the Bible. It's a Latin word. It came about because the Bible was being translated into the Latin. And Lucifer actually means morning star.

[5 : 02] And it's a reference to a passage in Isaiah about the star falling from the sky. So whatever this term means, however, all we're sure about is that, and we can be pretty sure about is that it is opposite to Christ.

So Paul is saying that the believer's sole allegiance is to Christ, whereas unbelievers follow the God of the age, whatever the name might be for that God. And so the two have nothing in common.

And then lastly, to complete the list, Paul now talks about the temple of the living God, God being the father of Jesus Christ, compared with idols, the fake gods of the ancient world.

And this last comparison is probably an indication of where the sin of the Corinthians were. Paul has been rebuking them for the fact of adultery, which they needed to come out from.

And Corinth itself was a place that abounded with idolatry and worship of idols. And so what was likely happening was that the Corinthians were at the one hand calling themselves Christians, but yet still worshipping idols.

[6 : 12] It may be idols doing that within the church itself, which seems shocking, but, you know, that was what they were doing. Or, in fact, they might be worshipping God one day, and then the next thing you know, they were down the road, joining in the worship of other idols around the city.

And some may have even involved sexual immorality, sleeping with temple prostitutes or the like. So this was very much a life and urgent issue for Paul.

He really wanted them to take note and repent of it, because a lot was at stake. And we saw last week, didn't we, his urgent appeal from them and asking them to respond with repentance.

You see, as Christians, whether the Corinthians or us, Paul says we are now the temple of the living God. We now live and exist to worship God alone.

We no longer worship idols, which, by the way, are dead and non-existent anyway. They're not real, are they? But if you worship idols, then the hold they have on you is actually very real.

[7 : 20] There is such a gap between the church and the world, therefore, that the church should not be joined to it. Now, of course, Paul is not saying that Christians have nothing in common whatsoever with the world, because we all share the same common humanity.

We breathe the same air. We eat the same food. We marry. We have children. We all get infected by the same coronavirus.

We're not immune just because we're Christians. So we have things in common with other people in the world. But this is not the stuff that Paul has in mind when he talks about nothing in common. Rather, what he's referring to are things to do with spiritual matters. It's to do with the mission of the church, how we live our lives in the world, because our aims and our goals are so different from the world.

And so on that front, Paul is saying, there is nothing in common. Now, notice as well that apart from one pairing, the comparisons in the list are really all collective.

[8 : 29] That is, Paul's focus here is on God's people. That's all of us together as a whole, and not primarily about individual Christians with other people in the world.

So I know that the common application of this passage, often taking verse 14, not to be yoked with unbelievers, so we often say, okay, that means we should not marry an unbeliever, or we should not go into business with people that are not Christians.

And these are well, these may well be secondary applications from this passage, right? I'm not saying that those are things that we should do. But the main application, I think, for tonight, what we ought to be thinking about and focusing on is actually about what we as God's people, together, should be doing.

How do we as God's people not be yoked with the world? That should be where our focus is. Paul's first point then is to say that just like light and darkness, water and oil, hot and cold, God's people and the world are distinct from each other.

They don't belong together. And opposites don't attract. Instead, he now explains that the church belongs to God. God is good and righteous and light.

[9 : 50] He himself has nothing to do with darkness, wickedness and evil. And so if Christ isn't joined with Belial and God isn't to Satan, then neither should God's people.

So Paul continues then in the second half of verse 16 by saying, 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 and they will be my people.

So if up to now, Paul has been emphasizing the horizontal, not to be joined with the world, he now shifts the attention to say that the reason is because we are joined vertically to God, belonging to God.

God has committed himself to his people, to live with them, to walk among them. And so in return, they are to be separate from the world in order to belong to God.

We are part of God's new creation, as Paul said in chapter 5. We've come out from the world, from the old creation into the new. Now this way of viewing God's people has been a feature of the Bible across the ages.

[10:59] It's not something new just for the Old Testament, but that's how God has treated Israel as well in the Old Testament. That's why Paul so easily appropriates.

These are all, as you see, you look down, they're all marked in quotes, aren't they? These are actually all Old Testament quotations, aren't they? They apply originally to Israel, and yet Paul easily appropriates it for the church because it's the same idea of separation and coming out. And that's why he continues in verse 17 and 18, and we're on to point 3 now of the outline. So building on his call for God's people not to be yoked because of their special relationship with God, he says, 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. Now as I said, these are Old Testament scripture, old quotations, but it's worth noting where they come from.

This second one about coming up to be separate and to touch nothing unclean is actually from Isaiah 52, verse 11. So I've got that on the screen and you can see exactly the quote.

[12:12] It was spoken at a time, and you know Isaiah, it was spoken at a time when Israel was in exile, scattered primarily in Babylon but also in other places like Egypt.

And this was God's call for his people to come out from those foreign lands and gather back in Israel. And as they do, the instruction was not to touch anything unclean so that when they gather, they can then worship God purely and rightly in the promised land.

And what God means by this is actually seen when he first called them out of Egypt that very first time when he rescued them from slavery and they entered into the promised land, God set them apart.

And so we had that reading by Kingly in Deuteronomy chapter 7 where he commanded them to drive out other nations from within, not to enter into treaties with them or marry their daughters or sons.

Now this is not about racism or anything, but rather the reason is for they will turn your children from following me to serve other gods. God's reason for that is that if they didn't do that, they would start worshipping idols and therefore become impure in their worship.

[13:28] Instead, verse 6 on the next slide, for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

And so from the very start, God had wanted his people to be separate from the world so that they can be his treasured possession, set apart for him.

Now Paul then completes this picture with the next quote, which is actually from 2 Samuel 7, verse 14, as you can see on the slide there. What's interesting here is that this prophecy is actually given to David and his offspring.

God's promise here is that he will establish the throne of David's offspring forever. That's why he says I will be his father, singular, and he will be my son.

And of course, we know that this was fulfilled and this is being fulfilled by Jesus Christ. But here, back in 2 Corinthians, notice now how Paul applies it to all of us as believers.

[14:39] He includes us as sons and daughters, plural. Can you see? So Paul is actually applying the promise of David to us. We have become heirs of the kingdom that was promised to David's offspring.

So we're co-heirs with Christ, no doubt, and we have only got the status because of faith in Jesus and what he's done. and so that is the first and most important thing we ought to do, believe in

Jesus in order to be part of this kingdom.

And yet, we mustn't lose sight actually of how mind-blowing this promise really is. God is now our father in Christ and we get to inherit Christ's kingdom.

We have become God's treasured possession, precious to God. or as I said earlier, we now belong to the new creation. God has plucked us out of the rubble, as it were, of the old creation, set us apart and made us treasures in the new.

And so Paul ends with this clear exhortation in chapter 7 and verse 1, Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves with everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

[16:00] Now, I have to say that I'm not one of these people to have the car as my treasured possession. Don't get me wrong, I'm thankful to have a car and I would be really hamstrung without one.

Does anyone think that their car is treasured? They probably don't want to say. But if you are someone that treats your car as your treasured possession, then you really take care of it, don't you?

You can tell those who do, don't you? They're always out on the weekend polishing their car. You're making sure it's spotless, not just outside but inside.

You apply product on your leather, leather seats and dashboard. You make sure your wheels are scrubbed clean. And then you take it out for a drive. And the idea is really you do want to be seen, don't you, in your treasured possession.

that when people look at it, it's like, wow, this is pristine, isn't it? Well, that's the way with God's view of us as his people. I mean, I'm not saying God's going to drive us and say, look, but we are his treasured possession, aren't we?

[17:11] That is, God wants for us to display his pristine glory and character. That's how much he means to us, and that's how much we are treasured to him.

And so that's the reason that Paul says now to purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit. We need to get into every nook and cranny of our lives and so that we make sure that as we are conducting ourselves as God's people, we reflect God's pristine character, don't we? He calls us to perfect holiness. Why? out of reverence for God as our owner, as the one who owns and to whom we belong.

Now that's not to say that we have to be sinless to be accepted by God. That's not the gospel, right? The gospel is the other way around. That we have already been accepted because of Jesus, and more than that, because we are heirs with Christ.

And so if that's the case, and we've done that already, then we ought to work out that status in a holy life. Give respect to what God has done for us by purifying ourselves and perfecting our holiness.

[18:30] And one aspect of that is not to be yoked with the world, because that would sully, doesn't it, our character and our nature. So if you really look at this passage, there is the first verse of not being yoked, then there is the last verse of purifying ourselves, but actually they both go hand in hand.

It's really like bookmark applications, isn't it? We're actually purifying ourselves and perfecting holiness, and one way of doing it is not to be yoked with unbelievers. But often I think we focus solely on verse 14, don't we?

Of not being yoked with unbelievers. And while that's an important part of the application, if we just focus on that one verse, I think we lose sight of the big picture of this passage.

We don't see why it's important not to be yoked with the world. It's because we're God's treasured possession. We have this grand vision that God has for us to be holy, to purify ourselves so that we can display his glory.

And so verse 1 of chapter 7 really is the positive side of not being yoked. And so I don't think that the application for this passage is to therefore isolate or insulate ourselves from the world.

[19:50] Like just only Christians can come to church or let's not hang around with people who are not Christians. You know, it's this funny idea of maybe they will pass on their immoral germs to us or something like that.

That is not the application and there shouldn't be the application from this passage. Rather, the positive side is we are to be so different from the world that we display God's glory as his people,

crystal clear.

That people can see us and know that we're God's treasured possession. That we've got something because of God, because he's given it to us, that none of the world has.

You see, there are often so-called sects and cults that take this idea of not being yoked to the extreme. They say, look, let's not have any contact whatsoever with unbelievers because we want to be pure.

pure. But ironically, as you've seen in many examples, they actually achieve the very opposite, don't they? That in their quest to search for this purity, the secretive nature of their gathering often breeds sin and abuse, the very things that they're trying to avoid.

[21 : 03] need. So, I've sort of given you an idea of where not to go, but the question now is then, how should we apply this passage?

And I want to ask, as Helen said, that I want to put this on you to think about, actually. I think the ways are countless and wide-ranging. And you probably understand better than me telling you what it is, because you're in that sense in the world and you understand exactly what it means to purify yourself from it.

So, I'm going to, in a while, when we finish, give you a chance after we sing to talk about it in your groups, just amongst yourself. But before we do, I just want to encourage you by giving you a few maybe pointers.

And the first thing I want to encourage you to do is to think beyond the obvious. So, yes, you can think of the obvious examples of not being yoked as a church, meaning we abstain from having interfaith services in Holy Trinity.

That's a pretty no-brainer one, I think. Not allowing the scriptures of other religions to be read in this church. And again, that's not to say we are being disrespectful or intolerant, but it's rather saying that the gospel message we have is so precious that we want to preserve it and make it pristine when we read it and when we teach it.

[22 : 29] So, that's why we're not doing it. So, that's an obvious one, so you don't have to go there. But, rather, I think we ought to go a bit deeper. For the Corinthians, the idols were pretty obvious one day.

They could see it as they walked down the street and go down the temples. The statues were all there to show them what idols looked like. But for us, our idols are more unseen, aren't they? even though no less real. And they have the same power to contaminate our worship. Now, what are idols? Idols are things that really capture our hearts, make us prioritize things in a way more than God, isn't it?

That we put those things ahead of what God wants. So, let me encourage you then to look within our own hearts and look at the way we do church and our motivation for church to see whether we have idols in that way.

So, for example, do we run our churches, this church in particular, Holy Trinity, do we run our church the way the world does and attract people the way the world does? So, do we, for example, use slick marketing or fancy social media as our way of attracting people?

[23 : 45] Do we disciple people with self-help methods? That is to say that Christianity is about helping you to become your better self. when we know that the gospel is the total opposite, isn't it?

Do we measure the success of our church with the yardsticks of the world? So-called KPIs, like bums on seats, or financial giving, profitability.

So, as an example, is it wrong, for example, when your church is known more for its worship ban, which itself is a profit-making entity, than for anything else in the church.

Or, another one, where your church is known only for the pastor, the lead pastor who leads it. That is, you draw people because of who the lead pastor is.

Though we look to our pastors or vicars, like he or she or they are the CEO. Worth thinking about, isn't it?

[24 : 48] those are the negative aspects, as it were, to avoid. But on the other hand, it's just as important to look at it positively. What does it mean to positively purify ourselves and perfect holiness?

That is, not just get rid of the bad stuff, but actually to positively portray what is God's character. And again, here we can have a very narrow focus, just to focus on sexual impurity, for example, but the idea of purity is a much bigger idea, isn't it?

