

WATCH OUT FOR THESE

by Ray C. Stedman

One of the most abused verses in the whole New Testament is Verse 17 of Chapter 6 of Second Corinthians. Many people fear and avoid it; others use it as a kind of club to clobber anyone who violates any of the common taboos of fundamentalist Christianity:

**"Therefore come out from them,
and be separate from them, says the Lord,
and touch nothing unclean;" {2 Cor 6:17a RSV}**

When I was a young Christian this verse was widely used by Christians to justify a kind of evangelical monasticism, a total isolation from the world. It was so artificial and so mechanical that it actually allowed a form of worldliness to come into the church that poisoned its life and paralyzed its testimony. Much of the revolt of youth a decade ago resulted from the sterility that was found in churches because of the misuse of this verse. I want to examine it with you in its context this morning.

Note especially the loving atmosphere in which this exhortation is set. This is part of Paul's description of what he has called the "ministry of reconciliation," {2 Cor 5:18}. This is a ministry that belongs to every single believer, without exception. We are all called to be "ambassadors for Christ" {2 Cor 5:20}, beseeching men to be reconciled unto God, reminding them that God is not imputing their trespasses against them. He is not angry with them because of their sins, but he is beseeching them to turn to him that he might heal them and restore them in his love.

Paul described the nature of this ministry in the closing verses of Chapter 5, illustrating the pattern of it in the very moving description of his own life. Now he confronts the obstacles that will invariably defeat us if we are not careful to obey this injunction from his hand.

There are two of these obstacles in this passage. One is found in the first three verses, beginning with Verse 11, the restricted affections; and the second, defiling compromises, in Verses 14 and on. Let us look at those.

First, this problem of restricted affections, Verse 11:

Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return -- I speak as to children -- widen your hearts also. {2 Cor 6:11-13 RSV}

Paul loved these people in Corinth, and he has manifested that love in various ways toward them.

He has demonstrated it, as he says here, by two special things. "Our mouth is open to you," he says. That means he communicated with them; he told them what was going on in his own life; he shared with them his feelings, his struggles, his failures, his pressures, his problems, and he let them know where he was. That is always a mark of love. To open up to someone is to love him. Contrariwise, to close up and not communicate is to violate love.

As I travel around the country, I find this is probably the number one problem in churches today. Christians actually think it is right for them to be closed in on themselves, to be private persons, unwilling to communicate who they are and how they feel and where they are in their lives.

That, of course, is the way of the world. The world teaches us to be private, to let no one see who we are. But we need to understand that when we become Christians that is the one thing we must not do. We must learn to

open up to one another.

Paul loved these Corinthians. He tells us he manifested toward them the unmistakable marks of love: "Our mouth is open ... our heart is wide." The open mouth is a symbol of full communication. He has opened himself to them; he has hidden nothing. They are fully aware of his problems, his struggles, his fears, and even his failures. He has just informed them anew of his dangers and hardships and yet of the resource he looks to for deliverance and support -- "the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God," {2 Cor 6:6b-7a RSV}. To communicate with this openness to another is to love him, for total love is total sharing. Now he wants them to love him back in the same way -- not for his benefit but for theirs.

Here is the problem with many churches in this country. They are filled with Christians who will not open up, will not communicate their needs and struggles to one another. Their mouths are not open.

"Our heart is wide," he says. What does he mean? Well, he means there is no favoritism; he included the whole congregation. He was not merely loving the nice people among them. He loved them all, the difficult ones, the ones who were struggling, the hard to get along with ones as well. There were no pre-conditions that he demanded before he would love somebody in the congregation, either. He accepted them as people. Though he knew their struggles, their weaknesses, their heartaches, their failures and their resistance, still he loved them.

The problem was that they were not loving him in return. This is the problem in churches, in individual lives, in homes, in families and in marriages today. It is a failure to understand the reciprocal nature of love. Love is a two-way street. It always is; it is inherently so. Love requires a response. Paul was loving them, but they were not loving him back. They were closed; they were unresponsive; they were coldly self-contained toward him. And the result? Paul puts it in one word: They were "restricted."

What does that mean? It means they were limited; they were bound; they were tied up by themselves; they were imprisoned within the narrow boundaries of their own selfish lives. As a result, they could not experience the richness of life.

Now that is what I find is wrong in many, many places and among many individuals today. They are Christians, but their lives are cold and barren. They are lonely, oftentimes. They are bored; they find life hardly worth the living. They have to struggle to get up in the mornings, to make themselves go on.

Why? Well, Paul puts his finger right on the problem. It is not that they are not being loved. There are people reaching out to them and trying to touch them and help them, but they are not responding, and love that is not reciprocated can go no further.

To be loved is to be given an opportunity to step into a new and wonderful and greater experience of life; to be freed, in a sense. That is what love does. When you love a child you free him. He relaxes, he begins to feel himself. We have all felt this. So, to be loved is to be given an opportunity to step into freedom, if you respond. The fulfillment of that opportunity depends on you. You are given the opportunity by the one who loves you, but you lay hold of it by loving him back.

That is why Paul pleads here with these Corinthians: "Oh! Corinthians, widen your hearts unto us. You are not restricted by us. You are restricted by yourselves, in your own affections. If you really want to experience the richness of love, then love back when you are loved."

This is one of the most important lessons we can ever learn in life. Love must respond. When you are loved what do you do? Do you love back, or do you say, "Oh, what a wonderful feeling! I hope they will keep that up?" Do you expect it all to come to you without a reciprocal response from you? No, that is impossible. Love must respond.

C. S. Lewis said a wonderful word, which is helpful at this point:

To love at all is to be vulnerable.

That, of course, is what keeps us from loving back. We are afraid we are going to risk something, and we do. He goes on:

Love anything and your heart will continually be wrung, and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your own selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell.

That is why people who do not learn this great lesson, to love back when they are loved, live in a little hell of their own making. So Paul ends this with this loving, fatherly appeal: "In return -- I speak as to children -- widen your hearts also." If they begin to love back, that will enable them to share themselves, to open up, to communicate how they feel, to begin to respond with affection as well. They will begin to live. That is what Paul wants.

I find that often in many congregations Christians are cold, frigid. They are tied up in themselves. They sit in services and do not even speak to people. Oftentimes this is encouraged as a kind of reverence, supposedly, but God is not interested in that. He is interested in people who are open and responsive to one another.

This coldness is what turns young people off. They come to our services and they are so cold and formal, oftentimes, that they are not interested; they are repelled by that. When congregations learn to be open, responsive, warm, loving and reaching out, it is always exciting. Young people are attracted to that, and they will come.

That is what the apostle is after here. It is a great feeling to be loved. We want it to increase, but we ought to understand that it cannot increase until we respond. Even God cannot love beyond what we let him love us. He loves us and he is constantly displaying that love in a thousand and one ways, but we do not feel that love until we respond to what we already have. That is what he says. Until we begin to talk to him, and tell him how we feel, and express gratitude and thanksgiving back, we cannot grow and increase in his enriching love.

Do you see now why Jesus said, "The greatest commandment of all is 'Thou shalt love the Lord, Thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength,'" {cf, Matt 22:36-38}? It is because God has already loved us and displayed it in providential care, supplying food and shelter and clothing and family concern and friends, and all the richness of life. In our salvation he has provided the lifting of the awful sense of guilt and rejection and has given us a sense of worth for our feelings of unworthiness. He has given us a sense of belonging to a family, of having a purpose for life. He has given us a challenge, a new power and a new relationship. All those are gifts of love, therefore, we are to respond continually, and as we respond more and more we experience more of the same.

This is what concerns Paul here. So he urges the Corinthians, "Open up, communicate, show acceptance. It is basic to all else." That is Problem #1. If you do not respond to love, then do not wonder if your life remains cold, barren, lonely, empty and meaningless. When you are loved, deliberately love back and life will begin to expand.

Let us look at Problem #2 now, the problem of defiling compromises. Paul says in Verse 14:

Do not be miseducated with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." {2 Cor 6:14-16 RSV}

Now, we are taking the obstacles that hinder the ministry of reconciliation. One of them, as we have seen, is

restricted affections, holding ourselves in to ourselves, keeping ourselves private people. The second is defiling comprises, getting involved with unbelievers in ways and associations that limit us and keep us from being what we ought to be.

Paul puts it here, "Do not be mismated with unbelievers." "Mismated" is literally the term, "unequally yoked." (That is how the King James Version puts it.) Do you know what a yoke is? We are all familiar with the covered wagons of the last century by which our forefathers crossed the plains. Usually they were drawn by yokes of oxen. A yoke is a wooden frame or bar with loops at either end, fitted around the necks of two animals which tied them together and forced them to function as one. That is what Paul speaks of here. He is thinking of Deuteronomy 22, where the Law says, "Do not yoke together an ox and an ass," {cf, Deut 22:10}. That may seem strange to us, but God was concerned that they not tie together two animals of a different nature.

I have never seen an ox and an ass yoked together, though once when I was traveling in the Middle East I saw a farmer plowing his field with a camel and a donkey. It was almost ludicrous to watch. The camel was three times the height of the donkey, and his legs were three times as long. He was striding along at a rather slow pace for him, but the little donkey was running as fast as he could to keep up. The farmer kept beating him all the time trying to get him to keep up. It was cruel. Both animals obviously were miserable; they hated being tied together like that.

This is what the Law reflects. It is a cruel thing to yoke together two things of incompatible natures. This is what Paul has in mind here. What he is saying, of course, is there are certain associations that Christians have with unbelievers that constitute a yoke, and these associations are a certain cause for misery and shame in a Christian's life. We are to avoid them. They will hinder us, limit us, bind us and keep us from enjoying the fullness God has in mind for us. They are like trying to mix oil and water. It is impossible. You can see this by the illustrations he uses.

First, he says, "what partnership have righteousness and iniquity?" Literally, the term is "lawlessness." What partnership can a right-loving person have with somebody who does not care anything about rightness? What partnership can a heart that loves fairness and justice have with someone who cares nothing for truth, who refuses all authority and does what he pleases? That is a certain formula for heartache.

Then Paul says, "Or what fellowship has light with darkness?" Those are the two most opposite things we know anything about. Christians are said to be light. Unbelievers are in darkness. It is not anything superior about the Christian that gives him light. It is simply the fact that he, as an unbeliever himself once, living in darkness, has come to the light, and now he is "light in the Lord" {Eph 5:8}, as Paul puts it in Ephesians.

Light is ever, in Scripture, a symbol of understanding, of an awareness of true reality. Now imagine someone who sees life clearly, and understands what is happening, joining himself or herself to someone who lives in ignorance of life, who lives in an illusion and fantasy and blind selfishness? That is a formula for disaster, for much pain, suffering and heartache, isn't it?

Then the apostle goes further, "What accord has Christ with Belial?" Belial is another name for Satan. It is a word that means "worthlessness," and it refers to Satan and his activities. What he does is always worthless. It never has any enduring value; it disappears; it is a froth, it is gone in an instant. Here, then, are the two great captains of the opposing philosophies of life, Jesus Christ and Satan, Belial.

I remember reading, in the history of the Civil War, several instances where brothers found themselves on opposite sides in the conflict. In every case they were fearful lest they should run into each other and have to face the possibility of having to kill each other. This is similar to what Paul is suggesting here. A Christian joined in a yoke to a non-Christian lives in fear that some day their ultimate loyalties must clash headlong; sooner or later they are going to have to face a showdown in these areas. This, therefore, is opening the door to great distress of heart.

Finally, Paul says, "What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my

people." This is one of the most powerful, the most beautiful descriptions of the glory of Christianity, the fact that God dwells in his people.

Some years ago there was a theological conflict which came into prominence called, "The Death of God Movement." Certain theologians were teaching that God had actually died. But that movement did not last very long. God had not died, of course, they had simply lost his address. They did not realize that God lives in his people. That is where you find him. The glory of Christianity is the revelation that our bodies are the temples of God. In that holy temple, he lives; therefore, we are to be guided by his principles in worship and in service.

Imagine a person who, as the temple of God, is joined to another person who is the temple of an idol. If you do not worship the true God you worship a false god, and behind the false gods, the idols of any generation, Paul told us in First Corinthians, are demons. Therefore, you are trying to link together the worship of God and the worship of demons. But this is an absolutely impossible thing. That is why Christians everywhere are warned against certain associations.

The great unanswered question, I am sure, in everyone's mind this morning is, "What is a yoke?" Is a business partnership a yoke? Is a union membership a yoke? Is marriage a yoke? Is a date with a non-Christian a yoke? We have to be careful here, because, as I suggested at the beginning of this study, this verse has been pushed way too far in that direction. There have been some who have taken it as justification for withdrawing from the world, from contact with non-Christians, and building a wholly Christian life from the womb to the tomb without making any friends or even contacts with non-Christians.

That is a violation of other verses. Paul in this very letter has told us we are "ambassadors for Christ," {2 Cor 5:20}. We are to be in touch with the world. We are to be contacting them with friendship and openness and love so that they are ready to receive our word, "Be reconciled unto God." You cannot do that over a chasm. You have to move in with people. It was Jesus himself who told us, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves," (Matt 10:16{KJV}). That is where Christians are to be. We are not to withdraw from the world.

Well, then, what constitutes a yoke that we are to avoid? Now, not all associations are yokes, but yokes have two characteristics by which we can always identify them:

The first one is that a yoke is not easily broken. It is a kind of permanent relationship. When you yoke two animals together they are bound together; they do not have any choice. Uncomfortable as it may be, they must do things together.

This is why the church has always taken this passage to refer to marriage, especially. Marriage is that kind of a yoke. It is a relationship that cannot be easily broken. The Law, the state, society is involved in marriage. This is why that "little piece of paper," which we hear spoken of so condescendingly today, is a very significant thing, because it rightfully introduces all the rights of society into a relationship between a man and his wife.

This is why, in First Corinthians 7, Paul tells us that marriage is to be "in the Lord" {1 Cor 7:39}, and warns against forming wrong marriage relationships with non-believers. Now he recognizes there that there are some who already are in that kind of relationship for one reason or another, and, if they are in it, they are not to break it, that is the point. There is a way of living within a "yoked" relationship, rising above it by faith, so that they can walk in godliness. But the wording of this verse here is, "Stop forming yokes. Don't continue to enter into relationships like this." And marriage is clearly a permanent yoke that is not easily broken.

I know that it is easy to be drawn into these relationships. Oftentimes our feelings are attracted to people, as people, and we tend to discount the dangers and to feel that everything is going to work out all right. Young people especially are tempted many times because of love and feelings of affection to enter into a yoke of marriage that is wrong. They sometimes rationalize themselves out of it. I see it happening all the time. But Paul is warning about something that is a deadly danger to faith.

Some years ago I remember reading a prayer addressed to God that a girl had written in her diary on her

wedding day:

Dear God, I can hardly believe that this is my wedding day. I know I haven't been able to spend much time with you lately with all the rush of getting ready for today, and I'm sorry. I guess too, I feel a little guilty when I try to pray about all this, since Larry still isn't a Christian. But Oh! Father, I love him so much. What else can I do? I just couldn't give him up. Oh! you must save him some way, somehow. You know how much I have prayed for him and the way we've discussed the gospel together. I've tried not to appear too religious, I know, but that's because I didn't want to scare him off. Yet he isn't antagonistic and I don't understand why he hasn't responded. Oh! if only he were a Christian. Dear Father, please bless our marriage. I don't want to disobey you, but I do love him, and I want to be his wife. So please be with us, and please don't spoil my wedding day.

It was a sincere prayer, but it was a very sadly mistaken prayer. Though she did not realize it, what she was really praying was something like this:

Dear Father, I don't want to disobey you, but I must have my own way at all costs. For I love what you do not love, and I want what you do not want. So please be a good God and deny yourself and move off your throne and let me take over. If you don't like this, all I ask is that you bite your lip and say nothing and don't spoil my wedding day. Let me have my evil.

That is really what she was praying, isn't it? And I am sure she went on to discover, as thousands and thousands of others have, the wisdom of the apostle's words here, "Stop being mismated with unbelievers."

Now the second mark of a yoke is that it constrains someone; it does not permit independent action. There is something that forces you to comply with what the other one wants to do, whether you like it or not. Any kind of relationship that does not permit a believer to follow his Lord in all things is a yoke. Even a friendship can be a yoke. If it is the kind of possessive friendship in which you feel you cannot do what God wants you to do because you will offend your friend, then that is a yoke and it must be broken.

God must have first place. We are his temple and he longs to bless us, as these words go on to show us. Paul here gathers together a group of texts from various parts of Scripture and quotes them:

**"Therefore come out from them,
and be separated from them, says the Lord,
and touch nothing unclean;
then I will welcome you,
and I will be a father to you,
and you shall be my sons and daughters,
says the Lord Almighty." {2 Cor 6:17-18 RSV}**

We are back again to this whole reciprocity of love. God's love is saying to us, "Look, I am here to enrich you. I want to make you my royal son and daughter. I want to be a Father to you, a tender, loving, careful, concerned, powerful Father to you, but I can't do it while you are still giving all your affection and all your ties to something else." Therefore, break the yoke, that is what he is saying, in order that you might experience the richness of God.

As we have already seen, love to be enjoyed must be responded to, but you cannot respond if you are clinging to an association that is going in another direction. Though God's love is waiting to bless us, we cannot feel it, and enjoy it, until we turn from the yokes that bind us.

Notice Paul's final appeal, Chapter 7, Verse 1:

Since we have these promises, beloved, [Hear the endearment of that word. He is not speaking roughly, harshly. This is a loving exhortation.] let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God. {2 Cor 7:1 RSV}

Who is it up to?

Well, it is up to you, isn't it?

Cleanse yourself. God cannot do this. Love cannot constrain you to love back. It can only plead, beg and entreat. You have to make that decision; you must break that yoke. If you are tied with some friendship or relationship that is dragging you down, then you have to break that; you must decide to give it up. God will not take it away from you. You have to decide that, and if you do, you make holiness perfect.

Now do not misread that. Many people have. They think that means that if you turn away from all the unclean things in your life, and give up the ugly, dirty things you may have stumbled into, that you are then making yourself holy. You never do that. Holiness is a gift God gives you right at the beginning of your Christian life. As Romans 12 tells us, "present your body a living sacrifice, [already] holy, acceptable unto God," {Rom 12:1b RSV}. God made it that way. You are not *trying* to be holy; you *are* holy; that is the point. But the holiness is perfected, it is made visible by acting like the one you have become, someone who is himself, herself, the dwelling place of God.

That is the appeal the apostle makes here. What a loving appeal it is, that we free ourselves from all these limiting, restricting, binding relationships, and be the men and women God has called us to be. That is what this world is waiting to see.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for faithful words which help us to understand life as it really is, which keep us from illusions and fantasies and self-delusions and sets us free. Thank you that you love us and want to see us men and women wholesome and whole, free and confident and able to function as we were intended. Grant to us that we will glory in the fact that we are the temple of the living God, and that you dwell in us. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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