

CITIZENS OF A DISTANT LAND

By Steve Zeisler

In my neighborhood on Tuesday, there was a toddler-age little girl who was crying at the top of her lungs. She was standing beside her father and pointing off down the block. And there receding away from her were two other children, somewhat older than she, headed off to the elementary school. I took in the whole scene and concluded that as this little girl watched her older brother and sister go off to school for the first time this fall, her world was changing. She couldn't go with them, and life was tragic as a result. The comfort of having older brother and sister who were there to be stimulating and to pay attention to her when she wanted them, who included her in their level of society, all of that had been taken away for no reason that she could understand.

The things that seem to us at an adult level to be secure and predictable often change as well. Not long ago the leaders of our country were discussing how to spend the "peace dividend," as the cold war was thawing. Six weeks ago probably only a handful of people in this room could have identified a picture of Saddam Hussein if we had to, but now none of us are unfamiliar with his visage. The "peace dividend" doesn't seem quite so likely to be spent anytime soon, does it? Human history does not unfold in orderly fashion, proceeding according to expectations. We live in a world that's uncertain. None of us can predict the future.

Our unwavering guide

But the Scriptures are for Christians an unwavering guide; we follow truths that will remain true always. We can have priorities today that will be priorities tomorrow and will never once grow less important. We know who God is and what he is committed to. We can represent him well in a changing world, knowing that he will not change. We are to face in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 a paragraph that will remind us of one of the things that will not change. No matter what is true of the changing world we live in, the issues raised here will continue to be important to us. We are being challenged by something here that may be hard for us, but it must not fade in importance as circumstances change. 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? 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, and they will be my people."

"Therefore come out from them
and be separate," says the Lord.

"Touch no unclean thing,
and I will receive you.

I will be a Father to you,
and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

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.

Paul uses two images drawn from the Old Testament. First, in verse 14 he makes the clear statement, do not be yoked together with unbelievers. Then as he outlines a series of contrasts, the final one has to do with the

temple of God and the temple of idols, so he picks up the imagery of the temple and expands on that. The one image is that of a yoke on two animals, and the other is that of the temple of God and what it means for God to dwell in a place and be at home in righteousness where he belongs.

We are called to be different enough to offer hope to those who are outside the Lord

The law of the Jews forbade that Jews should take two different sorts of animals and yoke them together with a hard, inflexible, wooden yoke. We're told in Deuteronomy that it is not permissible to take an ox and a donkey and yoke them together. It was given originally to forbid cruelty to animals. If a heavy-footed, slow-moving ox is locked together closely and unbreakably with a donkey, which is at a different height and moves at a different gait, the yoke will chafe and make both animals miserable.

A clear implication is suggested by applying this statement to people. Since a life built on faith in Christ is significantly different from one which has no place for him, we expect that yoking them together will make both the Christian and non-Christian suffer. The first point I want to make is that to keep either the unbeliever or the believer from needless anguish, they shouldn't be joined together.

Diluting the gospel

But there's another issue that concerns Paul when he says that believers should not be bound unbreakably with non-Christians: The Christian gospel is obscured or diluted by doing so. This concern extends beyond the personal experience of the two individuals. A yoke forbids independent action or influence; you can never be quite separate from the one you're yoked to, so that your convictions appear to be their convictions, your freedom to act is bound by their willingness to join you, what you believe must be compromised by what they believe, and increasingly the world is left with at best a distorted image of the presence of God in an individual's life. So one problem is that this unequal yoking makes both people miserable, but another is that it dilutes the impact of the life of God in the Christian.

The way this admonition is applied most often, and appropriately, is that a Christian should not marry an unbeliever. Marriage is a close and sturdy bond, an intertwining of two people. In married life, they take on life together, they raise a family together. The state of California and others even recognize that all the property that is acquired during marriage is community property; it is impossible to separate each partner's contribution from the other's.

This passage, of course, says nothing about an already existing marriage in which one partner comes to Christ. That's an entirely different circumstance, and the word of God deals with it elsewhere. But you should not knowingly, if you're a Christian, marry a non-Christian, because both of you will be made miserable, and because the reality of Christ in your life will be diluted or obscured. Now, there are other kinds of yokings. There are business relationships, economic ventures, even political alliances, and others that we should be concerned about on the same basis. But probably the first and most obvious relationship is that of marriage.

I remember once, early in my ministry, I had a couple come to me to get married, and the woman was a Christian and the man was not. I had never met them before. They had attended the church for a short time, and I was new and available, so they came to me and asked if I would do the wedding. We spoke for awhile, and this issue came up. I said, "It's obvious, sir, that you're not a Christian, and ma'am, that you are. I cannot in good conscience perform this wedding because I'm convinced that the word of God says it's wrong, and I don't want to contribute to your unhappiness." We talked some more, and the man was very interested. He had not heard anyone speak of faith in Christ as the center of one's existence. Church had always seemed to him to be much like a club. The woman was uncomfortable with the discussion as it became increasingly clear that I cared more about whether this man was going to hell or not than she did, and I'd only known him an hour!

For Christians to take a stand on these issues can seem to be self-promoting, a way of saying someone else is inferior. That's really not the point at all. We are called to be different enough to offer hope to those who are outside the Lord. Remember, Jesus said that if salt loses its savor, if it ceases to be salty, it's not good for

anything anymore. A city should be set on a hill so that it can be seen, because ultimately people are longing to find-desperate to know-that there are reasons to trust in God. What Paul is saying here is that we must be distinct enough that our example offers hope to outsiders, so that they might come to faith.

The great divide

I want us to notice two important things about this text. We have in it a series of comparisons that are all intended to make the same point, that reinforce one another. What do righteousness and wickedness have in common, what fellowship have light and darkness, what harmony between Christ and Belial, what agreement between the temple of God and idols, and so on. If we're not careful, an implication that we could inadvertently draw is that Paul is trying to say that all believers are attractive, wonderful people, and those who are not believers are all unpleasant and evil. But that is not true to our experience, is it? There are a lot of believers who are very difficult to be around.

Conversely, there are many non-Christians who are engaging, delightful people. And the reason for that is that these contrasts are not speaking of the immediate moment. They're speaking of the end of things. In the final analysis, when the journey is done, believers and unbelievers are very different from one another. Christ as head of his people and the devil, Belial, as the head of his people, could not be farther apart. The light and the darkness cannot be contained together. We are on a journey, all of us, and these contrasts identify the endpoint.

But no one knows when encountering an individual where they are on the journey. They may be people with wonderful, loving, ethical, believing backgrounds who are slowly drifting away from the faith and will end up in the darkness, or they may be people from wretched, hurtful, pain-ridden backgrounds who are listening to and responding to light and slowly moving towards the Lord. If you encounter anyone anywhere along the journey they could be pleasant to be around or not, they could be honest or not. So Paul isn't saying that Christians are nice and non-Christians aren't. What he is saying is that there is a divide between the two that will become more apparent, and that when the story is over, the two will be in fact utterly separate from one another.

Our distinctiveness in Christ

The second thing we should note here is that this passage is not forbidding all kinds of relationships between Christians and non-Christians. It is talking about yoking together, where the relationship is unbreakable, inflexible, where there is an intertwining that can't be undone, where there is no ability to distinguish any longer between Christian and non-Christian. Those kinds of relationships must be set aside. But friendship, acts of love and service for non-Christian neighbors, joining service organizations and neighborhood associations, meeting for business or recreation are all permitted and should be encouraged. We're the light of the world! The reason to be distinct is so that people can have hope, not so that we can hoard life for ourselves. The reason that salt is to be tangy is so that it will make others thirsty for the truth, not so that it can sit by itself on the shelf. So we ought to have all kinds of relationships with non-Christians. We ought to be willing to lay down our lives for those who don't know the Lord, to love our enemies, to say nothing of those who are nice to us. The thing to avoid is that our distinctiveness in Christ should be diminished.

Now let me take just one in this series of contrasts for a moment and go back over the point I made earlier, that what Paul is writing of here is the endpoint, not the midpoint of the process. In the first of these contrasts Paul says, "What do righteousness and wickedness have in common?" The word for wickedness there is not unrighteousness as the King James Version has it. We do not have righteousness and its exact negative. The best translation is, "What do righteousness and lawlessness have in common?" If someone loves God's truth, obeys it, aligns his life with it, what does he have in common with the person who has come to the end of the process and doesn't believe there is such a thing as righteousness at all? That is lawlessness; there is no standard, no line against which I should measure my crookedness. Remember the statement at the end of the book of Judges, "There was no sovereign in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." That's the opposite of righteousness, when we get to the point not that we're disagreeing over what's true, but that we deny even that there is a possibility of truth. That's the end of the road.

A help agency here in town sent a flyer out recently that proclaimed itself "dedicated to strengthening and enriching the mental, physical, and spiritual wellness of all people, and to improving human conditions within the changing patterns of family and community life." I know some of the people involved, and they really do want to be helpful. But consider the implications of the final phrase, "within the changing patterns of family and community life"-as if it's a given that change is good, as if we shouldn't challenge or respond to the changes. But many of the changes in family life in this culture are destructive. For too many, commitment means nothing. Whether children are cared for or not by the adults in their life doesn't particularly matter. Marriage, nonmarriage, serial marriage, homosexual marriage, couplings of all kinds; children shuttled back and forth, fought over, or ignored-all these arrangements want to be considered morally equal alternatives to the "traditional family." The changing patterns of family life, as our culture is increasingly perceiving it, are towards lawlessness, where there is no good, nothing is better than anything else; whatever we choose is fine. The stage is set, therefore, in a lawless society, for only the most violent to succeed. This series of contrasts (verses 14-16) is talking about the end of the line, not about a particular person who may or may not be in the process of coming to Christ. But the end of the line is righteousness on the one hand and lawlessness, doing whatever is right in one's own eyes, on the other.

Purity and temple worship

Very quickly, let me ask you to think about the second image I alluded to earlier-the temple. The temple is where God dwells. It is where he may be approached. We are the temple of God, the place where God dwells on earth. In both First and Second Corinthians the apostle makes this point.

The Jews, in order to approach God in the Jerusalem temple, had to repent of their sins. They had to face unrighteousness and deny it; they had to set aside everything that was not of God in order to approach him. Purity was required for temple worship. And that is Paul's appeal here. In addition to forbidding wrong associations (being yoked to unbelievers), this passage calls for purity in the place where God dwells-our lives.

In one of the most awful passages in the Bible, 2 Kings 21, we read these words about king Manasseh:

He built altars in the temple of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, "In Jerusalem I will put my Name." In both courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced sorcery and divination, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger.

He took the carved Asherah pole he had made and put it in the temple, of which the Lord had said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever."

We are the temple of God, the place where God dwells on earth

Manasseh, the king of Judah, deliberately, defiantly, murdering his own son, setting up phallic symbols in the temple of the Lord, went out of his way to desecrate the temple of God. The place where God should have been honored became a place of impurity. And the nation suffered as a result; they were like their king. Now, what Paul is appealing to here is that we should be the opposite. Listen carefully to verse 1 of chapter 7: "Since we have these promises [that harkens back to verses 16-18, to God's saying, I will be their God, I will be a father to them], dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."

The pilgrim remnant

Hebrews 11 describes the pilgrim remnant who were different from their contemporaries. Their citizenship was in heaven. They were only passing through. Their passports read "City of God." And they never quite settled down; they were always peculiar. That's exactly the calling here. Out of reverence for God, because of his promises to us, let us become people who long for holiness, who choose it, who are different. We've got

to be different from the non-Christian world. Whether our associations, our yokings, diminish our distinctiveness, or whether impurity diminishes it, we have to choose to be different so that those who don't yet know the Lord have some hope of finding him.

Most non-Christians think religious people are as phony as everybody else. Politicians are phony, businessmen are phony, religious spokesmen are phony, media personalities are phony, priests are phony, feminists are phony, antifeminists, everybody's phony. Everybody's in it for themselves. There isn't an honest person, there isn't someone whose life is really changed. Everybody's got an axe to grind, everybody's got a selfishness to pursue. Some sound high-minded, some don't, but everybody's in it for themselves. No one's ever really changed. You're a product of your environment and your heredity, and there's no way to ever be different from that.

If there aren't real Christians somewhere, whose lives are really changed, in whom God is obviously present, then this descent into hopelessness continues.

Do you remember Helen Keller? She died in 1968, and most of you know the story of her life. She was someone who was bounded by darkness and quiet. As a young child, there was no possibility of the world ever opening to her except through the sense of touch. It was all she had. Eventually Anne Sullivan, in her concern for Helen Keller, was able to communicate, "There are people out here, Helen, there's knowledge to gain, relationships to have, beauty to experience, poetry to know, worlds to lead." This woman who had lived in both darkness and quiet all her life had, because of the investment of someone else, a chance to break out of that world into something that was bigger and better, more satisfying and fulfilling than she knew anything about. We live in a world of people who don't know that there's anything better, who don't know that it's possible to be different. No one's ever invested enough and been genuinely different and set hope before them so they have a reason to believe. What we need to do is examine our associations and our commitment to purity, to being different, to being real, so that God may be honored and our world may be given hope.

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