

16/2/14

GSM

2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1

[*read*]

When we plan sermon series we read ahead to work out the best split of passages going through a book or theme to preach on. We try as far as possible to preach our way through a book, or, in this case, part of a book. When we preach on one of the New Testament letters we might leave out bits which we think have more relevance to the church being written to than us today, but we try not to leave out passages simply because they're difficult. And when we looked at today's passage my heart sank a little because it was going to be a difficult talk about marrying non-Christians. Few of my go-to churches who publish material on the internet have sermons on it, and it may be because when you preach on something like Christian and non-Christian marriage it is hurtful to some of you, irrelevant for others.

Because that's what this passage is about isn't it? How many of you have heard the first line of this morning's reading "Don't be yoked together with unbelievers" applied to Christians and non-Christians getting married? Well, the more I've studied it the more I've come to realise this **isn't** about marriage. Three reasons:-

- Paul doesn't mention marriage once. When Paul writes about marriage in his letters, he writes about marriage. He doesn't faff around.
- Part of the passage if applied to marriage would directly contradict other Bible teaching on marriage. Verse 17 tells the believers in Corinth that were yoked with unbelievers to "come out from them and be separate". Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians **expressly instructs** Christians who are married to non-Christians not to come out from their marriages and be separate.
- If you do a search on the word "yoke" on the website biblegateway you will not find one meaning in the Bible that applies it to the marriage relationship. It is *always* used to mean ownership. When Israelites are in slavery they talk about being yoked to the

power enslaving them. When Jesus calls people to him he says that his “yoke is easy”.

It's not often that I refer to the headings of the text in the Bible because Paul didn't write them – they were added in by the editors of this version of the Bible. But on this occasion they've got it right when they call this passage “Warning against idolatry”. That's what this passage is about, not about marriage. By the way, if you want to the Scriptural teaching on Christians marrying non-Christians here it is: 1 Corinthians 7:39. Paul is writing to widows, but I can't see why what he says hasn't got application to all, widowed or never married, male or female. Here it is: “she is free to marry anyone she wishes, **but he must belong to the Lord**”. So, if you're a Christian and wondering if you should marry a non-Christian, that's what the Bible says. But not in this passage this morning.

You can see though why people assume this passage is about marriage. This is a yoke:-



And here is how it's used:



So, the two cattle get placed in this yoke and pull behind them a plough, or a cart, or something. Their strength is joined together because the power of two is greater than the power of one.

Paul says “do not be yoked together with unbelievers”. Why? From verse 14: “For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ¹⁵ What harmony is there between Christ and Belial [that’s a name of Satan by the way]? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?”. What this passage is about is making sure that Christians do not join forces with those who worship idols. Why? Because they are opposed to God’s plans.

Now I’m going to take a risk this morning and try to show what happens when you get yoked together with someone who doesn’t want to go in the same direction as you. I don’t have a yoke. But I do have a stack of chairs here that needs to be moved across the floor. And I need two volunteers. [*choose volunteers*] Now, I want you to work together to pull this stack of chairs across the floor. This is an image of what happens when Christians are yoked together with other Christians. Off you go. [*watch*] Now, was it easier with two of you working together. OK, this time, I want you [*name*] to pull the chairs further in the direction you were pulling them, and I want you [*name*] to try to pull the chairs to where they were at the start. [*watch*] What happens? Chaos. That’s a picture of what happens when a Christian

gets yoked together with unbelievers. The Christian can't go in the direction he wants to go, because he is struggling against someone who is controlling the yoke and moving in a completely different direction. As it says in verse 16 – what agreement is there between God and idols? None. They want to go in different directions. If you take on the yoke of an idol then you will follow where that idol takes you, not God.

The Bible takes this very seriously and it sees this as a matter of being “clean” before God. The concept of being unequally yoked was a familiar one to Paul's readers because in the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy it comes up in the context of not yoking together a ritually clean animal such as an ox with a ritually unclean one such as a donkey. By yoking them together you turn the clean animal into something unclean. You'll see that reference in verse 17: “touch no unclean thing and I will receive you”. By quoting all the various Old Testament passages in this bit of his letter Paul links the instruction not to be yoked together with God's claim over his people and their acceptability to him. In verse 1 of chapter 7 Paul refers to this yoking together with unbelievers as being something which “contaminates body and spirit”. So this is serious stuff. We are talking about something that goes to the heart of God's promise to be our God and something that has the potential to contaminate body and spirit.

So what does it mean to be yoked together with unbelievers?

I think that may have been easier for Paul's readers to identify than for us. Corinth in those times had prominent temples to the gods Apollo and Aphrodite, six other temples to Greek gods and five precincts to what were known as “Lords of the mysteries”. Small dining rooms accommodating a dozen or so people formed part of these temple complexes. It was common for people to throw dinner parties and invite friends to a meal in the name of a god. Prayers to the god were offered up during this meal. Paul is saying have no part in it. It contaminates you, and God calls you to be holy – set apart.

But we don't have any temples where you go to worship idols today. Or do we? What is an idol?

I want to read out an extract from a book by Tim Keller called *Counterfeit Gods*, because I think it is the best way for us to identify what an idol is:-

What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.

*A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. It can be family and children, or career and making money, or achievement and the views of others, or saving face and social standing. It can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, competence and skill, secure and comfortable circumstances, your beauty or your brains, a great political or social cause, your morality and virtue, or even success in the Christian ministry. An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant secure." There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is **worship**.*

If anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life and identity, then it is an idol.

What Keller is saying in his book is that each of us will be tempted to run after different idols. We may have temples to them - in first century Corinth you would look to the skyline and see temples to Apollo and Aphrodite. In twenty-first century London you look to the skyline and see temples to banking, business and power. But there are equally powerful idols in the family or social standing which have no obvious temples. It doesn't make them any the less powerful as idols.

Interesting to think about an idol that is fundamental to your identity. Let's get personal. Each of us has idols, which we need to get unyoked from. When I was thinking about this I was drawn to the idea of what I am against who I am. What I am is a list of items describing what I do, what my family situation is, what I believe, what my circumstances are. So, here's my list of what I am – I'm not listing everything but only those things that might become idols:-

- A follower of Jesus ... I'm 100% sure
- A husband
- A father
- A son
- A reasonably successful lawyer
- Healthy-ish
- Enough money
- British
- A musician
- A lover of good food and good wine

And here's the fundamental bit. This is **who I am**. This is what is left when everything else is taken away, what defines me, what is core to my existence

- A follower of Jesus ... *I hope*.

I know that I am a follower of Jesus – I'm 100% sure – but the best I can say is that I hope that it's my core identity. I hope because I don't truly know how I would react if any of the things which define what I am is taken away. That will demonstrate if my core identity as a follower of Jesus is true, or whether I am actually defined by my idols. If any of the things on my list of what I am was taken away it would hurt me deeply. If I became convinced that

my faith was based on a pack of lies it would have the ability to destroy me. But I don't know what else could do that as well. It may be a macabre thought, but it's got me thinking. An interesting exercise for each of us to do. Each of us needs to examine what we hold more dear than God. Those are our idols. Sometimes circumstances bring it out. In the wake of the banking crash in 2008 there was a trend in high-flying executives of business that had suffered losses killing themselves. Now these people still had more money than they knew what to do with, they still had families and houses and all that. But they defined themselves by their success. That was *who they were*. When what was taken away, so was their reason for living.

What we should do is to examine our idols and put them to one side. As Paul says in verse 17: be separate. Put them to one side. Purify ourselves. Make Jesus the fundamental thing in our life. But how? The human heart by its nature is something that yearns for a thing of beauty to attach itself to. The human heart will always latch on to something – we can't take away one idol from it without giving it something else to give it meaning. It says in the book of Ecclesiastes that God has put eternity in the hearts of men. We all have a God shaped hole in us, which we sometimes fill with other things. If that thing is taken away then often you find that one idol is removed only to find that another takes its place. You see this with high flyers who become workaholics. They plough themselves into their careers. What happens when they retire or get shifted on? They plough themselves into other things – charity work, sports, health and fitness, whatever it is. They can't keep still. They have to fill the God-shaped hole.

So how can we fulfil the command of verse 1 of chapter 7 and purify ourselves of our idols without other idols filling their place? By filling the God shaped hole with God. The heart will look for something beautiful to latch on to, something noble and grand, to adore and worship. And we have that in God, in the gospel and in Jesus. We need our spirit to be infused with excitement and gratitude at God saving us and welcoming us **so much** that it becomes the controlling force in our life. So how can we do this? We can't do it by willpower – scrunching up our face and trying really hard. We have to let the truths of God's word penetrate our hearts with their power so that they change our mind.

I'd like to suggest a way of doing that this morning, in the hope that we can do it on our own or in our small groups. It's called Biblical meditation. Now when we hear the word "meditation" we might think of people sitting cross-legged on the floor and humming, with someone burning a joss-stick in the background. Emptying our mind. Biblical meditation is the opposite of that – it's filling our mind with Biblical truth and the consequences of it. So let's try.

Look with me at verse 18. "I will be a father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters" says the Lord Almighty. Let's meditate on those verses together.

What does it mean to be brought into a family?

It means being accepted by someone who chooses **you**. No-one becomes a son or daughter through their own choice. They are born into a family, they are adopted into a family. Being in a family is therefore not a matter of achievement. God must make the move to make us his child. Do you see how this removes any requirement that we are good enough or good looking enough or successful enough or popular enough to be accepted? God accepts us without us needing to be good enough to be accepted. We simply need to accept him as our father.

What does it mean to have a heavenly father?

We have had lousy fathers or great fathers, but what does it mean to have a perfect loving God for a father? It means that we can trust that he will never leave us and let us down. It means that he is looking out for us. It means that in everything he is bringing us up to

maturity in the way that a father teaches his children to read, to ride a bike or to be part of society. God is making us better, he is training us, he is improving us. A young child with a loving father will not fear when his father throws him in the air because he knows he will be caught. We can trust God because he is our father. I have a great father who is an inspiration to me. But he has his flaws, as do we all, and he will one day die. God is perfect and eternal.

What does it mean to be a child of a family?

It means having importance, having a name that reflects who you are, having a status. A child with no family has little reason for security and tend to live a chaotic life. When children without parents are adopted into a family everything changes. Chaos is replaced by order. You are given a new surname which shows that your status has changed. You are defined in part at least by your new family. When I was at school there were people who walked a little taller when their father was known in the town for having done something great and there were children who hid away when their father was caught in a situation of shame. In becoming children of God we become children of the first and the last, of the ultimate, of the “I am”, the reality by which all other realities are measured. It means having the ultimate status and the only one that will ever matter. You may be the best in your field in your job or the top musician or sportsman, but your business may fail, or others will come to take your place as your powers wane. God says “I have engraved you on the palms of my hand, you are mine”. He says “no man shall pluck you from my hand”. Our status is secure.

How did we become sons and daughters of God?

How much are you prepared to pay for something you really want? That house, that dress, that sports car, that necklace, that holiday? You might make sacrifices for it and give up other things to be able to afford it. But how many of us would give up a child? Sounds obscene, doesn't it? Nothing is important enough to give up a child. But God gave up Jesus,

his one and only Son, who he loved, so that we might be called his children. Jesus was the child that went willingly to his death so that we might obtain what he lost on the cross – the right to be called a child of God. How much did God pay for us? Everything. Can your career die for you? Can your looks die for you? Can your money die for you? No – you may well suffer for your career, your looks or your money but God ... God died for you.

Now that's an example of meditating on what it means to be a child of God. You can do it with verses from the Bible dealing with God's love, God's justice, God's mercy, God's eternal nature, or any aspect of God's character. By focussing on what the Bible teaches us about God it allows the Holy Spirit to move in our hearts and draw our hearts towards the beauty and majesty of God, the wonder of the gospel and what Jesus has done for us.

My favourite piece of music at the moment is the last movement of Prokofiev's seventh piano sonata. I listen to it most days. The more I listen to it, the more I hear things that bring out the majesty and beauty of the work. The more I hear it the more excited I am by it and the more I want to share it with others. How much more then will we be moved by the gospel of Jesus by allowing it to penetrate our hearts as we meditate on God's word and let it live in our hearts.

It says in 1 John 3: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. ³ **All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.**" This is how we purify ourselves of idols, by going after something infinitely more worthy, true, substantial and beautiful, and letting our hearts latch on to that instead. Praise God that we have that in the gospel of Jesus. Let us worship him alone by making him our only treasure, the thing that our hearts long for.