

Why Can't We Date or Marry the Unsaved?

It's probably one of the most common and nagging problems for parents, relatives and church leaders. It's a topic that when preached on, almost always causes offence and anger. It's an issue that leads to church discipline, or worse, if not dealt with – church deterioration. What are talking about? We're dealing with the contentious issue of Christians dating and marrying the unsaved.

You don't have to work very long in any church before this one comes up. A believer starts some kind of friendship with an unbeliever of the opposite sex. Pretty soon, the friendship grows into something else. If the church is Biblical – steps are taken to confront the erring Christian. If the church is not, it is left as it is, and that Christian either falls into sin, or the name of Christ is further blasphemed by an impure, immoral church.

In a previous talk called *'The seven stages of compromise on personal relationships'* I traced the progression of someone falling into this trap. It starts with "We're just friends." It moves on to "I can win them to the Lord." It then goes on to "I'm in too deep, we can't break up now."

The next stage is usually anger at those confronting them over this issue: "You just don't understand." The fifth stage is usually walking out from accountability and authority. The sixth stage we called the calm before the storm – where everything seems fine. The final stage is reaping what we sowed – sin calls in its debts, and it's payback time.

I won't repeat all that here. Here let's see from the Bible justification that it is wrong for a believer to date, court or marry the unsaved. There are some Christians who dispute this claim. They say that Scripture never explicitly forbids the practice, and so it must be okay. We'll see from Scripture why that idea is wrong, and why the Bible insists upon close personal relationships only taking place between believers.

Essentially, when we talk about not courting or marrying the unsaved, we're dealing with what is called personal separation. Our text is from **2 Corinthians**:

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

2 Corinthians 6:14-18

From this passage, we see the principle of separation, the purpose of separation, and the pleasure of separation.

- **The principle of separation**

In this Scripture, God gives a command. This is not a suggestion, a recommendation, or some advice we can accept or reject. This is an imperative from the Lord to His children: do not be unequally yoked with unbeliever. What does that mean?

“Yoked” is a farming illustration. Two oxen are yoked – or joined up together – to plow. You do not yoke a goat with a bull, or a sheep with a cow. The animals have to be the same in kind to plow together properly. God is saying that He does not want His children to be yoked up together with a totally different kind of person.

In other words, God’s sheep are not to be yoked together with goats – unbelievers. He then goes on to emphasise that being yoked together with an unbeliever is the same as trying to combine the opposites of light and darkness, Christ and Satan, God’s temple and idols.

We must then ask – well, what does it mean to be yoked together? Yoked speaks of a binding relationship, since the animals were tied together. It also speaks of a close relationship – the animals were closely tied together. It also speaks of a relationship with a common goal.

Dating, courting and marriage obviously fall into this category. It is a close relationship, one with commitment, and in the case of marriage – permanence. It is also one that is plowing, so to speak, towards a common goal. Indeed, if you do not have the goal of marriage in dating or courting, you are not following a Biblical pattern.

God puts it very clearly – He commands – don’t be in a close, binding relationship with the unsaved. As if we had trouble understanding what He means, He makes it very clear in verse 17: *“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing.”*

1 Corinthians 7:39 also makes it clear that Paul only wanted believers to marry other believers: *“The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.”*

Now, understand that God has always had this principle of separation. In the creation account, we see God dividing the sky from the sea and land, the land from the sea, night from day. God emphasised from the word go that He separates light from darkness. Before sin had even entered the picture, God was illustrating separation.

The Law made separation very, very clear to the Israelites by the use of being ceremonially clean or unclean. Some things were to be touched, other things were not.

Some things were to be eaten, others were not. Indeed, our text today is actually Paul quoting **Deuteronomy**. Listen to the way God emphasises separation to them:

Thou shalt not sow thy vineyard with divers seeds: lest the fruit of thy seed which thou hast sown, and the fruit of thy vineyard, be defiled. Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together. Thou shalt not wear a garment of divers sorts, as of woollen and linen together.

Deuteronomy 22:9-11

God went so far as to tell the Israelites not to make their clothing out of two different kinds of material, not to sow their field with differing seeds – emphasising separation. God made these points so clear because He wanted Israel to regard herself as different to the pagan nations. Her constant mindset of clean and unclean, defiled and undefiled reminded them in the very mundane details of life that God is holy.

God wants His people for Himself. We are not to be like the other nations, because they do not have Yahweh as their God. That leads us to His purpose.

- **The purpose of separation**

God was not being arbitrary in commanding separation. There were, and are, very good reasons for it. God wanted his people to be separate for two reasons

- 1) It portrayed Him as a holy God, unlike the pagan gods.
- 2) It protected His people from sin and compromise.

If God's people were separate in personal living, it sent a statement to the surrounding nations: 'These people are different. Their God is not like ours. We cannot just include their god on our list of hundreds of others. He is completely unlike ours. He is holy and pure and righteous. He does not tolerate sin. He will judge it.'

At the same time, they would see the justice, the mercy, the kindness in God's law, and say, 'this God is also gracious and loving and merciful.' It would draw people to Him. And the same is true today. It is our lives as separate believers that cause people to ask about our God. Peter says in **1 Peter 3:15**: "*and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.*"

We are to be ready to give an answer to any man who asks about why we live our lives the way we do – what are living for, hoping in, working towards? Our problem is we focus on the kind of answer we will give, but our lives are often so identical to the unsaved that no one asks us in the first place.

When we are separate in our use of money, in our work ethic, in our use of leisure time, in what we watch and listen to and the places we go, and our speech, and our priorities

and plans and ambitions, and goals and desires – that is when people will ask us: what are you hoping in? This will glorify God.

Now consider, how does yoking with an unbeliever in a personal relationship allow you to display the glory of God? It does not. In fact, it says the opposite. It says in the clearest terms: what God did for me is not so great that we cannot be together. God is not so holy that we cannot have a union. My life philosophy has not been radically altered by accepting Christ – it is in fact pretty similar and compatible with yours.

Holiness has not so affected my plans, priorities, ambitions, goals, motivations, desires that we cannot fuse yours and mine together. There is no contradiction in us joining forces to make a family.

This is why Paul, under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, asks the most extreme questions: *"What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?"*

He is saying, 'Since when have light and darkness made agreements? Since when has righteousness and unrighteousness sat down together for a nice meal, and traded business cards? What exactly do Christ and Satan agree on?' Paul isn't pulling his punches, because the truth is that severe. Believers are completely, radically changed.

That does not sound like the pragmatic excuses given today: "I can win them to the Lord!" It sounds like God is saying – you are opposites! Opposites cannot join forces!

You cannot believe that you will witness or display the glory of God to that person when you make the most fundamental compromise of all – you say that holiness does not have to be separate from sin, faith does not have to be separate from unbelief. How can you possibly believe you will win someone over to Christ when you have already surrendered the most important ground of all – that of God's holiness?

The second purpose of separation is one of protection. God wants His people separate because sin is like yeast. A little spreads right through a lump of dough, affecting all of it. Paul says that sin tolerated in the body of Christ will leaven the whole lump. We are already wired to lean towards what is fleshly, what is sensual and of this world. The world is within us. Until we die and are glorified, we will have an enemy within.

A lack of separation will feed that enemy within, and cause it to grow. Factor in the fact that we are dealing with personal relationships, and we have magnified the problem. We now not only have a natural leaning toward sin, we have hearts craving affection and longing for companionship. This is a combination waiting to be exploited by the devil.

Let us say it loud and clear: while exceptions do occur, when a believer chooses to date or marry an unbeliever, it is the believer who will backslide, not the unbeliever who will be converted. Yes, there are exceptions.

However, most of the accounts I have heard involve a different scenario altogether. They involve two people who are already married – one gets saved, and then through their prayers and testimony, the other one may come to Christ. Seldom does outright disobedience to the Word bring the salvation of the other person.

A believer who dates, courts or marries an unbeliever has already surrendered the greater portion of their convictions by doing so. How can you expect to grow, or even convict the other person, from a place of compromise?

On the other hand, consider that for the unbeliever, there was no compromise at all. They are quite happy to embrace you and your convictions, so long as you don't stand by them. They essentially have the upper hand. This was the whole reason why the Old Testament saints did not want marriages between their children and unbelievers. As Abraham said to his servant:

"And I will make thee swear by the LORD, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell: but thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac."

Genesis 24:3-4

By Laban's words when meeting the servant, it seems this was because they knew the Lord, because they call Him by the personal name of God, *Yahweh*. God wanted a spiritual match for Abraham's son.

Likewise, when Isaac and Rebekah had Jacob and Esau, it says in **Genesis 26:34**: *"And Esau was forty years old when he took to wife Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite: which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah."* Why was it a grief? Was she a terrible cook? Was she obnoxious? Was she a poor dresser? No, the problem was that she was a Hittite – an unbeliever.

In **Deuteronomy 7:3-4**, God says: *"Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son."* Just in case you think God was simply making a racial distinction, check the next verse for the reason: *"For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly."*

God forbade intermarriage purely for spiritual reasons. In fact, like in the case of Ruth and Boaz, marriage with non-Jews was fine so long as the unbeliever had converted to the God of Israel.

Your heart leans toward the one you love. How possible is it on the one hand to love someone in a romantic sense who does not love God, and then on the other hand to love God with all your heart? No man can serve two masters – ultimately your love for one will make the other one a relationship of rejection.

So serious was this separation that Nehemiah records what he did:

In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: and their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people. And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.

Nehemiah 13:23-25

Or listen to the prophet Ezra:

Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, "The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass. And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished.

Ezra 9:1-3

"Mingled holy seed" – those are strong words. God is almost saying that their offspring was corrupted, tainted, polluted – by having marriages and children with those who denied the God of Israel.

Here is the bottom line: God is jealous over His children. The Bible does not mince its words when describing that God is to be our first love. There is simply no way around it. When we date or marry the saved, we can be yoked together in a lifetime journey to know, love and serve God. However, when we date or marry the unsaved – that person is competition to God.

Since they do not direct us to God, as a godly husband or wife will, they will direct us to themselves. This does not mean that someone who gets saved while in a marriage must separate, as **1 Corinthians 7** makes it very clear you are to remain married. This is talking about walking into a disobedient situation by beginning a relationship where the person you will be with will draw love away from God, instead of increase it.

I think there is possibly nothing more dangerous in this world than to make someone a rival to God. If you love them, for their sake, and your sake, spiritually – separate from them.

God wants the spiritual health of His people. He knows the weakness of our hearts. He knows how our natural desire for companionship can be exploited by Satan through a nice, charming, fun, seemingly moral and caring unbeliever. He knows how we will find all sorts of reasons why this ought to work – why they are a lot nicer than most Christians.

God does not answer our pragmatic arguments because He knows all of them before we utter them. He simply commands us to separate. He flattens our arguments with His command: regardless of how you think it may work, spiritual enemies can not form a union. But up to now it sounds almost all negative. God, however, is not that way. It is the goodness of God that leads people to repentance, so consider then:

- **The pleasure of separation**

God promises pleasure to those who separate. He says: *“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty” (2 Corinthians 6:17-18).*

Now isn't God speaking to believers? Why then does He promise to be a Father to those who separate? I believe the answer is that God is promising the pleasure of intimacy with Him, when we refuse the friendship of Satan to choose the Father-heart of God. Greater closeness and intimacy with God awaits those who separate from sin and compromise.

The reason why so many Christians have a dullness of heart, a lukewarmness, a lack of joy, is because they are trying to drink from both wells – that of the world, and that of God. They want intimacy from God, but also from those who deny Him. They want love from God, but also from those who hate Him.

God is not mocked. He will not unravel the treasures of His glory for the worldling who is not certain where the best water is. His glory remains for those thirsty enough to go without the water of being yoked together with the unsaved.

Holiness is the source of happiness. A holy, separated life is the spiritual greenhouse in which the plants of real joy, praise and pleasure in God grows and thrives. **Hebrews 12:14** says: *“Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.”*

No one sees or enjoys God in the smoky atmosphere of compromise. It is in the fresh, morning breeze of purity. It is in the clear, unpolluted atmosphere of a single-minded, consecrated heart, that God manifests Himself in the Word.

Psalms 1:1 speaks of the pleasure of separation: *"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful."* Blessed in Hebrew means, 'oh, how very happy'! Separation does not bring deep sorrow or lasting regret. Compromise brings that.

God has the principle of separation. It's not merely a principle – it's a precept. A command. But God has a purpose for separation too. It's to preserve the glory of His name in those who wear it. It's to preserve us from the tempter's snare, from sin capturing and destroying us. As such, He promises us pleasure – a deeper and closer walk with Him.

Would you rather drink from the shallow and polluted pool of the love of a faulty, unsaved human, or from the gushing pure and endless fountain of God's love? Whatever you decide, it can't be both. No man can serve two masters. Make the obvious choice. Choose God. People who chose man over God have many painful stories to tell. No one who chose God over man ever regretted their choice.