

‘HOLINESS OUT OF REVERENCE FOR GOD’ 2 CORINTHIANS 6:11-7:16

[St Mark’s Online Services- Sunday, July 5, 2020- 9:30am/5:00pm]

1. You Can Tell A Lot About A Person . . .

I’ve often thought you can tell a lot about a person by the books on their shelves. When I visit someone’s house for the first time I often find myself curiously perusing their bookcases to see what their interests are. And that can open up some really good conversations about the things they enjoy, and the things they really care about.

But I suspect we could finish that sentence in lots of other ways too, couldn’t we? You can tell a lot about a person by how tidy or messy their office is. You can tell a lot about a person by how they choose to spend a day off. You can tell a lot about a person by flicking through the contents of their phone.

But what about this one? You can tell a lot about a person by the company they keep. You learn a lot about a person by getting to know their family. You can understand a person better when you see who their friends are. You can find out things about a person when you see who they listen to, and who they turn to when they need help. I think there’s a lot of truth in that. Of course there’s more to knowing a person than simply knowing who they know. But relationships are such a central part of our lives. It’s true to say that the more we understand a person’s relationships, the more we’ll know them.

So let me ask you this morning/evening. What do your relationships reveal about you? What could someone tell about you from the company you keep? What do your friendships say about you? Who do you listen to? And who do you turn to? What do your relationships reveal about you? That’s really the key question for us as we look at this next passage in 2 Corinthians today/tonight. Let me read it for us. We pick up the thread of Paul’s letter in the same place we finished last week.

[Read 2 Corinthians 6:11-7:16]

Now there’s a lot to take in from these verses- I think probably enough for two or three sermons! So we won’t get into the finer points today/tonight in any great detail. But to be honest I’ve enjoyed the task of preparing for this sermon because I’ve normally thought about some of these paragraphs as discrete sections. But having this whole passage to reflect on has really forced me to think about how the different sections relate to each other and what ties them all together. So I think taking a bird’s eye view of these verses this morning/evening might help us to better track the thread of what Paul’s really trying to impress upon the Corinthians, and upon us.

So in order to make sure our interaction with the passage doesn’t get lost in the details today/tonight, I thought we’d just take a look at each of the major characters on view

here, and to point out three things about each of them. The Corinthians, Paul the Apostle, and God.

2. The Corinthians.

Let's start with the Corinthians.

- withholding affection

And the first thing to notice is that Paul thinks the Corinthians are withholding their affection from him. This is what he says explicitly in 6:11-13. Paul and his colleagues have opened wide their hearts to the Corinthians and he wants them to do the same in return. He wants them not to be reticent with their affection.

And I think Paul's saying the same thing at the start of 7:2: 'Make room for us in your hearts'. Paul wants a relationship with the Corinthians marked by the proper warmth of deep Christian fellowship. He doesn't want just to love the Corinthians and have them love him- perhaps the way people love family members they don't particularly enjoy spending time with. Rather, he wants the relationship to be marked by genuinely warm affection. So this is one of the key things he calls for here¹.

- in danger of contamination

But alongside that, Paul also calls for them not be yoked with unbelievers. This is what we hear in 6:14. And Paul invites us to imagine two animals joined together by the yoke around their necks as they plow a field together. And in the Old Testament law the Israelites were commanded not to cruelly allow two different types of animals to be yoked like this². So this is the image Paul uses here. But in this verse he describes a believer in Jesus being joined together with an unbeliever. And the key problem he sees with this is the danger of contamination. The section that begins with the command in 6:14, ends in 7:1.

[Read 7:1]

Paul wants to see God's people being holy- fully devoted to God, like God in his moral purity. And so he says we need to purify ourselves from those things that contaminate us with unholiness. And, in particular here, Paul is thinking about contaminating partnerships, contaminating relationships. What does he mean by this?

Well, clearly, he's not encouraging the Christians in Corinth to cut off all contact with unbelievers. We've already seen in this letter that Paul expects Christians to be the aroma of Christ amongst the unbelievers they mix with. He expects Christians to be ambassadors for Christ, sharing the message of reconciliation with the world³. So we

¹ The only imperatives in this passage are in 6:13, 6:14, 7:1 (implicitly), and 7:2. 6:13 and 7:2 both have to do with the Corinthians' affection for Paul and his co-workers.

² See Deuteronomy 22:10

³ Not to mention Paul's explicit repudiation of withdrawing from sinful unbelievers in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, and 1 Corinthians 7:12-14.

know he definitely isn't encouraging Christians into some kind of monastic withdrawal from relationships with unbelievers. But instead he seems to have in mind those kinds of tight relationships that can undermine holiness. Here he takes us to the question we began with today. What do our relationships say about us? And are there any which are leading us away from God? A friendship? A political allegiance? A social circle? A family loyalty? A romantic relationship? A partnership in business? Whatever it might be, Paul wants to see Jesus-believers avoiding contamination.

And the danger is real is it not? Over the years, to my great sadness, I've seen many believers fall away from their faith in Jesus. And I can testify that in the vast majority of cases some kind of relationship with an unbeliever was a key factor in their drift from Christ- in what Paul would call here their 'contamination'. And this is why the questions Paul asks of us here are so crucial. What kind of relationships might we be in that are spiritually dangerous? And if we're attending to those relationships what relationships aren't we attending to? If we're loving and listening to unbelievers most, we're likely to be loving and listening to our Christian brothers and sisters less. And this was Paul's concern here. I don't think the move from 6:13 to 6:14 is just Paul randomly jumping to a whole new thought. There's a connection. Paul seems concerned that the Corinthians might be withholding their affection from him because they've given their affection to unbelievers instead. So he wants them to flee from spiritually dangerous relationships and to come back to spiritually encouraging ones- like their relationship with him. And Paul wants us to do the same- to flee from relationships that might be spiritually risky.

And he follows up the exhortation in verse 14 with 5 rhetorical questions⁴ and then three promises. And the three promises all draw in various ways on key moments of promise from the Old Testament. For example, the quotation in 6:16 draws on a few texts⁵, but especially on Leviticus 26:12-13. There God promised the ancient Israelites that there would be great reward in them living in obedience to his word. And at the same time God reminded them of their freedom. Leviticus 26:13 says that God had broken the yoke of their Egyptian slavery and freed them to live for him. And I suspect the yoke language there is in Paul's mind when he writes about the yoke here. He's encouraging people who've been freed from slavery not to enslave themselves again. But it comes with a promise- the promise of God's presence and fellowship. The promise of verse 16 in fact reminds me of that picture of Adam in Genesis 3 walking in the Garden of Eden with God in the cool of the day⁶. It's a picture of sweet communion between God and his people. And so Paul asks us- which would you prefer? To be yoked to unbelievers and in danger of contamination? Or to walk with God- the God who freed you from slavery to sin and who wants to bless you with his presence, with his loving fatherhood?⁷

⁴ I am not persuaded by the argument made in several commentaries that the key issue here is idolatry. That seems to me to take the final rhetorical question of the five and to make it the question that drives the interpretation of the whole section. It also seems to me to end up making Paul's concern here primarily a vertical one (the relationship of believers to an idol) rather than a horizontal one (the relationship of believers with unbelievers).

⁵ See also Jeremiah 32:38 (a post-exilic restoration promise), and Ezekiel 37:27 (a promise for the day eschatological resurrection)

⁶ Genesis 3:8

⁷ Note that the promise of verse 17 seems to draw on the call to pure priesthood in Isaiah 52:11, and the promise in verse 18 seems to have a connection to the call to loyal kingship in 2 Samuel 7:14.

The logic here is that no one can look in two opposite directions at the same time⁸. Friendship with the world means enmity against God⁹. So will we look to God and fear him¹⁰ and draw nearest to his people? Or will we draw nearest to the people of the world and so miss out on the fellowship with God and his people that he promises to those who pursue holiness?

- yet proving devotion by repentance

These were the questions Paul had for the Corinthians. And they clearly flowed out of a very genuine concern he had for their spiritual wellbeing. And yet, the third point to make about the Corinthians here is that despite Paul's anxiety for them, he nevertheless derived a lot of encouragement from the news he'd most recently received about them.

He transitions from the plea in 7:1 to then say in verse 4 that he's found great encouragement in the news Titus has just brought. You might remember from back in chapter 2 that Paul had written a painful letter to the Corinthians confronting them over some unresolved sin in their church. And he refers to that again here. In chapter 7 he acknowledges again that his letter had caused them grief¹¹. But it was a productive grief that led them to repentance¹². As a result of Paul's rebuke and the sorrow it caused them, sin was dealt with. And their sorrow was not merely the worldly sorrow of self-pity¹³, but it was the God-pleasing sorrow that produces fruit- the fruit of salvation- verse 10, the fruit of no regret- also verse 10, and the kind of practical fruit that verse 11 talks about. Theirs was not the fruitless grief of someone like Judas- a grief that led only to death. Theirs was the productive grief of someone like Peter- who turned away from his denial of Jesus to serve Jesus once more- with all his heart and soul.

And that's what Paul sees here in the Corinthians' repentance. Devotion to God. And as a result devotion to him as well. Listen again to 7:12.

[Read 7:12]

Do you see the connection again to Paul's main concern? He wants them to open their hearts to him. He wants their affection as they have his. He's worried about them giving their affection instead to unholy unbelievers. But he also wants them to see that the work of God in them is actually leading them in the right direction. By repentance they are demonstrating a choice for the sweet fellowship of God and his people, and they are demonstrating that deep down they really are devoted to Paul- to Paul who has taught them the gospel and encouraged them to live for Christ.

⁸ I owe this phrase to Marcus Loane in *By Faith We Stand*- p.45.

⁹ James 4:4

¹⁰ This is the language of 7:1 translated as 'reverence' in the NIV. Note that the language of fearing (God) also recurs in 7:11 (translated as 'alarm' in the NIV), and 7:15. It also featured in 5:11.

¹¹ The word "grief" is all through these verses: 7:8, 7:9 x3, 7:10 x2, 7:11

¹² Literally the phrase in verse 9 is 'grieved to repentance'. Verse 9 also says, literally, they were grieved 'according to God'.

¹³ See Roy Clements' commentary *The Strength of Weakness*- p.159.

3. Paul.

And it's to him we now turn. And given what we've just seen about the Corinthians, these three observations about Paul aren't going to be surprising.

- full of affection

The first thing to say is that he's full of affection for the Corinthians. This is what he said in 6:11-13 so unmistakably. But it's what he says again in 7:2-4 as well. And in that paragraph he stresses that his love for them has been marked by purity and integrity- something he's been keen to emphasise earlier in the letter as well¹⁴. And this is an important point for Paul because he sees holiness as inextricably linked to fellowship. He's asking them to grow to their fellowship with him by committing to holiness of life, but in 7:2 he's making it clear that the same applies to him. He knows that his fellowship with the Corinthians depends on his holiness as well.

And then this section returns to the theme of Paul's affection for the Corinthians in the last paragraph of chapter 7. Having talked about their godly and fruitful repentance he expresses his affection for them once more and he talks about the affection Titus feels for the Corinthians as well. It's important to notice that affection is the idea that bookends our passage today- it's at the start and at the end. And that gives us a significant clue, I think, to what's driving this whole section of the letter.

- expressing concern through exhortation

But secondly when it comes to Paul we see that he expresses his concern for the Corinthians through exhortation. He exhorts them in 6:13 and 7:2 to open their hearts to him because he's concerned about their lack of affection. He exhorts them in 6:14 not to be yoked together with unbelievers because he's concerned about their affections heading in dangerous directions. And he exhorts them in 7:1 to purify themselves and to perfect holiness out of reverence for God because he is concerned about their spiritual safety. All these exhortations are the product of fatherly love. Remember he says in verse 13 that he speaks to them as his children in Christ! They are earnest and strong encouragements, but they are filled with tender care.

- yet proud, comforted, and joyful

And it's with that same fatherly tenderness that Paul not only expresses concern, but also rejoices in the progress the Corinthians are making. And this is the third thing to say about Paul. Because the Corinthians are at the same time worrying to Paul and encouraging to Paul, his reactions are at the same time concerned and proud. And lest you think that that sounds strange I can assure you that my own experience as a pastor is just like Paul's. People are complex and I'm one of them. And the story of a person's life is rarely a simple story. So, in loving people I care for I can feel both godly worry and deep pride all at the same time.

¹⁴ See also the Tyndale commentary of Colin Kruse for a very interesting discussion of how Paul has used the vocabulary of 7:2 earlier in both 2 Corinthians and 1 Corinthians- p.141.

And that's what Paul expresses here. Mostly worry in chapter 6. But mostly delight in chapter 7. In verse 4 he says he's proud of them and he repeats that in verse 14 when he testifies that they've given him no cause for embarrassment after he boasted to Titus about them. He also speaks of his comfort and encouragement in hearing news of their obedience¹⁵. And he speaks again and again of his joy¹⁶.

Paul is like a father to them isn't he? His own emotional life goes up and down with their spiritual fortunes. If they're distant from him or being spiritually foolish, he worries like a father who stays up late at night waiting for his teenage daughter to come home. And if they're devoted to him and spiritually strong he proudly rejoices like a father who's just seen his little son ride a bike without training wheels for the first time. Such is Paul's love for them.

4. God.

But finally, what of God? What do we see him doing here? Again, let me just point out three things.

- comforting the downcast

Firstly, he's comforting the downcast. That's Paul's testimony in 7:6. Before Paul had found Titus again and heard his report on the Corinthians Paul was anxious to the point of distraction¹⁷. He was very worried about them. He was downcast. But by the coming of Titus and by the good news he brought Paul's anxieties were relieved. God comforted him.

But notice how Paul expresses himself in 7:6. He doesn't say 'God comforted me when I was downcast.' He says, God comforted me- God 'who comforts the downcast'. This is a teaching opportunity for Paul and one mustn't miss! This is not just a word of personal testimony but an opportunity to declare a truth about what God is always like. Paul says that God did for him what God always does. And in this moment Paul reprises the great theme of 2 Corinthians 1 as well. That God comforted Paul when he was downcast ought to be no surprise. In the same way, when God comforts us when we are downcast, it's not really newsworthy- even though it's wonderful. This is God doing what God does.

Do you know what it's like being with a friend when you see a really spectacular sunset and you just stand there in silence because there's nothing you can say to capture the beauty? I think there are often moments like that when we read the Bible too. This is one of them. And this is why I think it's imperative we stop and notice what Paul says here. Because it's a truth of great beauty. [Pause] Are you downcast today? Here's a promise for you that you can't live without. And even if you're not downcast today, I

¹⁵ Paul uses the word for comfort/encouragement over and over again this section (the same Greek word translated in the NIV differently at various points): 7:6 x 2, 7:7 x 2, 7:13 x 2

¹⁶ 7:4, 7:7, 7:13, 7:16

¹⁷ Cf. 2:13

would say that the promise of God's comfort when you need it is enough to bring comfort even in prospect. Sisters and brothers- this is our God. The God who comforts the downcast.

- making promises to the holy

But we also see him here as the God who makes promises to the holy. 7:1 is another spectacular verse and I think it's possible to miss the breathtaking thing it's saying. Because it's easy to become focussed on the commands of 6:14 and 7:1 and to be wrestling with what they mean. But then you can miss the reasons Paul gives, the motivation he suggests. And I think without the motivations the real power of these verses is lost.

Yes- Paul says don't be yoked with unbelievers. Yes- Paul says we should purify ourselves from that which contaminates. Yes- Paul says we should seek to perfect holiness. But why? Well, the end of verse 1 says out of reverence for God. Because we fear him. But who is the God we revere? It's the God who invites us into this holiness by his promises. The start of 7:1 is absolutely crucial. Since we have these promises, dear friends. We purify ourselves because of the promises- the promises Paul displayed for our viewing in 6:16-18. Those verses at the end of chapter 6 aren't just a few Old Testament quotes designed to reinforce the point. No- they are the point. It's with these words of promise that God beckons us away from unrighteous relationships, from darkness, from Satan, from idolatry. And it's with these promises that he woos us towards the light, towards his temple, towards Christ.

You see, God doesn't just tell us to break off our unholy relationships so we can live a less enjoyable life but at least an obedient one. No. God tells us to give up those relationships because he has something for us that's so much better! Himself. Come to me, he says, and I will live with you, and walk with you like I walked with Adam in the garden in the cool of the day. Come to me, he says, and I will receive you. Come to me, he says, and I will be your father and you will be my sons and daughters.

This is the story of the prodigal son written in different words. This is an invitation to us to leave behind those people with whom we've partied and with whom we've wasted the father's inheritance, and to turn back in godly repentance to the God who never ceased to love us and who will welcome us- with his embrace, with a ring on our finger, and with the cooking of the fattened calf. Do you see? Until we understand the call to holiness in the context of God's fatherhood we don't understand Biblical holiness at all. Until we understand the call to holiness in the context of God's fatherhood we don't understand Biblical holiness at all.

- growing affection amongst his people

Which leads me to the third and final point to make here about the work of God. Because as God invites us into repentance and holiness, he's growing affection amongst his people. Just as we have to understand holiness in the context of God's fatherhood, so too we have to understand it in the context of Christian fellowship. And I really think this is the central thread that ties this whole section of Scripture together.

Christian holiness and Christian fellowship are inseparably linked. Paul's affection for the Corinthians is part and parcel of his commitment to a ministry marked by love, integrity, and purity. And the affection Paul seeks from the Corinthians will never come if they give their loyalty and devotion to false teachers, or idolaters, or the wicked. The affection Paul seeks can only flow from the pursuit of purity in their lives, from repentance, and from devotion to God- a devotion that's always expressed in devotion to those who minister God's gospel.

And I don't know about you but I would say that this is my experience in the life of God's church. Where someone strays from faithfulness to Christ, where they pursue yoked relationships with unbelievers, where they're unrepentant of sin- it changes my relationship with them, even if I don't want it to. And conversely, where a brother or sister fruitfully repents of sin and I watch on with encouragement and joy my affection for them grows. Where a sister or brother demonstrates a steadfast commitment to holiness, their fellowship with others pursuing holiness irresistibly grows. In the church, purity builds intimacy.

I have to confess I haven't thought enough about this in the past. But reading this section of 2 Corinthians as a whole has really helped me to see it more clearly. And I hope these verses help you in the same way. When we pursue holiness because of the promises of God, we enjoy more and more fellowship with him as our father. And as we enjoy more and more fellowship with the father, so our fellowship with his children grows too. Holiness breeds affection. And without holiness there can be no true affection. In the church, purity builds intimacy.

And that's why our relationships reveal a lot about who we are. Because they don't just show that we are devoted to a group of people we happen to gather with each Sunday. They actually show that we're devoted to them on the sight of God- because we're devoted to him, and to the pursuit of being like him. And, on the flip side, if we're yoked with unbelievers, it doesn't just show that we care about them or that we like doing certain things with them. But it reveals something about how we are towards God. It may reveal that we care about him and his holiness less than we once did, and less than we ought.

5. Us.

So, as I conclude. What about us? Because we're characters in this story too. What is God's word saying to us this morning/evening?

Well, if you're not yourself a believer today/tonight as you listen to this, I hope these verses will help you to understand why Christians you know won't want to be yoked with you. This might explain why they don't want to spend all their time with you, or become closer to you, or marry you. This might explain why they won't join the cause you'd love them to join, why they seem to listen to the advice of others more than yours, why even though they're in your family they seem to have a loyalty to others that outstrips their loyalty to you. Of course, it's not that they don't love you. They do. It's simply that they can't afford to risk being distracted from their loyalty to Christ. There's just too much at

stake. Their affections belong first to Christ and, now they know Christ and his perfect Heavenly Father, there's just no other way they could possibly choose to live.

But if you're listening today as an unbeliever then I hope these verses will do more than just explain that dynamic to you. I actually hope they'll cause you to wonder at what you might be missing out on. I hope they'll cause you to consider the promises of God- the God who gives salvation to people who repent, who welcomes back rebellious sinners with open arms, and who doesn't just forgive- though his forgiveness is unspeakably good- but who makes us his children and who shares the purity of his own holiness with us. Honestly, you have no idea how good life can be till you've tasted life with Christ. [Pause] And I hope these verses today will give you an appetite for seeking him out with fresh resolve.

But if you're a believer listening to this today, as I know most of you are, I hope these verses will help you to see something you might not have seen before- the inseparable link between our holiness and our fellowship, the way your choices in life impact your relationship with me just as my choices in life have an impact on you. I hope these verses will make you long for the intimacy of Christian affection more and more, and that you'll see how necessary to that affection your holiness is and mine. I hope that might be clearer to you today than it ever has been before. But I also hope that these verses will remind you of some precious things that I trust you already know. And I hope you'll pause awhile to mediate on these precious things like you might stand in awed silence to watch a beautiful sunset. Precious things like these . . .

That God invites you to share in his holiness. He invites you to repent of sin and then feel no regret. He invites you to revere him- to approach him with fear and trembling as he deserves. But that he invites you as well to know his unfailing comfort, the beauty of his presence and companionship, and the sweet affection of a life yoked to his people- your brothers and sisters in Christ. More than anything today I'll hope you go away reflecting on his promises. His precious, precious promises.

[Read 6:19-7:1]