

The Temple of the Living God

2 Corinthians 6:14-18

¹⁴Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ¹⁵What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶What 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."

¹⁷"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."

¹⁸"I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

There was a story floating around about former President George H.W. Bush. Supposedly, he was visiting a nursing home, where he took the hand of an elderly man walking the halls and asked kindly, "Sir, do you know who I am?" The man replied, "No, but if you ask the nurses they can tell you." Christian, do you know who you are? Church, do you know your identity?

Two cities in the Midwest, Michigan City, Indiana and Avon, Ohio each claim the identity of "Duct Tape Capital of the World." There cannot be TWO Meccas for celebrating America's favorite fix-all! Personally, I must give the nod to Avon since they actually go to the trouble of hosting an annual *Duct Tape Festival* over Father's Day weekend, complete with a parade.

You can call yourself anything you want. What's more important is how you are known. If you asked the world to define a Christian or the church, we might not care for the answer. At our very best, the world thinks us naïve even when it acknowledges a certain nobility whenever mutual love and community seem evident. At our worst, the world thinks of us as self-righteous, severe, intolerant, superstitious – even evil. Paul, on the other hand, tells us something truly remarkable about our identity: "For we are the temple of the living God."

As products of God's grace, we recoil from lists of prohibitions such as those in our text. "Do not be yoked together" ... "Do not touch" ... "Come out from them!" We like to think that we will always do the right thing if we will just let ourselves be moved by love, but that minimizes the old man of sin in us. Paul, the New Testament's foremost authority on grace, saw a place for practical lists of 'do's and 'don't's. Apparently, he understood life in Corinth. That city was as decadent as any in the ancient world. The spiritual perils for Christians there warranted some ground-rules to go along with this reminder of who and Whose they were.

"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers." We live in this world. We will cross paths often with unbelievers? We must witness to them, but that's not "yoked". To "be yoked together" speaks of any relationship where compromise with worldly values is inevitable. Paul forbade believers from going to court with each other where they must rely on unbelieving judges to settle their disputes. A Christian must be thoughtful in his business partnerships and his commitments to secular organizations. Our objective, after all, is holiness.

Typically, this yoke metaphor is applied to marriage, but how many Christian young people declare themselves wiser than Paul in this matter only to encounter heartache later or even the erosion of their own faith? "Missionary dating" is the somewhat "sarcastic term" applied to that good Christian girl or boy who is sure that he or she can convert the unbeliever with whom they become romantically involved. But what happens when the pursuit of holiness becomes such a half-hearted consideration? Journalist Terry Mattingly cites troubling new research:

“Times have changed ... a surprising number of females have graduated from “missionary dating” to “missionary cohabitating.” Women who say they are deeply religious are just as likely to live with men before marriage as women who are not ...”

Scott Stanley, Sarah Whitton, and Howard Markman in “Maybe I Do: Interpersonal Commitment and Premarital or Non-Marital Cohabitation,” written for the *Journal of Family Issues*.

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers,” Paul cannot apply this principle to every possible life scenario. He trusts that the Spirit’s guidance in concert with your loyalty to God can lead you to reverent conclusions. He does, however, ask five questions that might guide your deliberations:

1. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common?
2. Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?
3. What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? (any worthless thing opposed to Christ)
4. What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?
5. What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?

These are rhetorical questions, but if you somehow missed the rhetoric, the answers to these five questions are nothing, none, none, nothing and none. If you spend anymore time than that on an answer, you’re just looking for a loophole. Ultimately, remembering who and Whose you are is of more value than flirting with loopholes. “For we are the temple of the living God.”

We do not attend God’s temple. We do not pray in the direction of God’s temple. We **ARE** God’s temple. If we can just appreciate what that means and never take it for granted, we could only conclude: “Wow! God is with us!” Would not joy drive away any despair that binds us? Would not peace dissolve any fear that grips us? Would not patience melt away any aggravation that provokes us? And, to the point of this text, would not reverence assist us as we choose to take this path or that path? We are God’s temple. What does that mean, and how do we respond?

I. The Pauline Understanding of God’s Temple

A. Paul Was Speaking of a Holy Place

To a Jew like Paul, “holy” meant “set apart” and “belonging to God.” When Solomon’s temple was completed, it was set apart from every other building in Israel. Various pieces of furniture and vessels were used in the temple. As holy things, they were used solely for the rituals for which they were prescribed. To use them for any other purpose was to profane them. To say that the church, you and I, a community of believers, is the temple of the living God is to say that we are God’s holy possession. Do we realize how easily careless handling can profane us?

Holiness is true religion before God. It requires that we renounce the world. Our whole lives must become living sacrifices to God. That doesn’t mean that we have no contact with this world. On the contrary, we are called to be salt and light for this world and to live as light to this world. Of course, this is only reasonable if we are unique, set apart - holy to God in this world.

B. Paul Was Speaking of a House for Prayer

God’s temple was a place for Him to hear His people. Solomon dedicated the one he built as such:

¹⁸“But will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! ... ²¹Hear the supplications of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive. - 2 Chronicles 6:18, 21

When God's exiled people returned to their homeland after the Babylonian captivity, the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem would become known as "a house of prayer for all the nations" (Isaiah 56:7). Jesus cited Isaiah when He drove from the temple the moneychangers and merchants that had set up shop there. "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" (Mark 11:17).

It follows that the heart of every believer and every community of faith should also be a seat of prayer? What was said of the first temple certainly applies to us. Paul wrote:

¹⁶Be joyful always; ¹⁷pray continually; ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Is that practical? Can joy and prayer be constant? Can a grateful spirit be a fixed feature in our lives? Even the best of Christians wear down, right? Sure, but the wise Christian and every wise church knows that prayer is the path through every season of temptation or despair. A uniquely Christian joy emerges not only in circumstances that would make anyone joyful, but also in adversity. Where does this joy come from if not from a fixed mindset that the Lord is near?

To "pray continually" means to have a settled attitude of dependence on God so that prayer will occur freely. A man might have a prayer closet or a daily appointment with God, but he also must learn how to call forth joy and gratitude not only in times of profound need and profound blessing, but especially in moments that seem nondescript. Prayer, praise, Bible reading and every other spiritual exercise can become habitual and joyful when we understand that we are God's temple. No longer are they tedious disciplines. They become the stuff of a relationship.

C. Paul Was Speaking of a "Kind" of Dwelling Place for God

The temple was where *JEHOVAH* was pleased to sit between the cherubim on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. Occasionally, however, His presence was even more conspicuous. In response to Solomon's prayer of dedication for that temple, God acted:

¹When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. ²The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it. ³When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the LORD above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, "He is good; his love endures forever." – 2 Chronicles 7:1-3

This presence of God is what Paul most specifically alludes to in the text: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." **God is with us**

When the little fellow accidentally spilled his drink on the floor, he volunteered to clean up the mess himself and headed to the back porch to get the mop, but it was dark and he hesitated. His mother reminded him God is everywhere, even in the dark. He thought for a minute. Then, putting his face to the door, he said, "God, if you're out there, will you hand me the mop?"

We need never think twice as to whether is with us; "For we are the temple of the living God."

II. Our Practical Undertakings for God's Temple?

A. How about a Little Jaw-dropping Wonder?

When God filled that first temple with His glory, the people spontaneously broke into this song of response: "He is good; his love endures forever." Should we be any less astonished that the Creator, the Majesty of heaven and earth, the High and Lofty God Who inhabits eternity should want to set up house in this fellowship and in our hearts? Did this come about because the Holy One would look down upon us and say, "Hey, nice digs!"? No, in our fallen states, living in us could not have seemed like an attractive option for One Who is holy. There was much to do.

Have you ever started a little project at the house that just kept growing and growing? I painted a bedroom, but the wife thought that made the carpet look old. And, of course, that made the other bedrooms look old. And, the new bedrooms made the paint in the hall look bad. But, when God chose to dwell with us, He knew how much work would be required. He knew that dressing up the "really bad" in us would just expose the "pretty bad." But, He undertook the project anyway, knowing that for His holiness to abide in us, nothing less than a *new creation* would do. Now, if we would only learn to better reflect our newness so as to break away from that which is old.

B. How about a Little Housekeeping?

"For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ¹⁵What 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?"

Nothing, none, none, nothing and none. Clearly, we are called to break away from unclean thoughts, bitter grudges, irreconcilable worry, inconsolable despair, insatiable appetites for the treasures of this world. So, how is it that I can so easily rationalize so much that, objectively, speaking, is not in the best interest of my pursuit of holiness. When Jesus drove the moneychangers and sellers of birds from the temple, His disciples remembered a prophecy that said, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:17). It seemed that nothing was more important to Jesus at that moment than maintaining the integrity of God's house.

How about you? Are you zealous for personal purity? Are you zealous for the holy witness of this church? You cannot watch others pursue holiness while you entertain your cravings? You cannot watch others bear the financial load for the work while you pursue worldly amusements. You cannot watch others play the servant while your own heart is governed by self-interest.

Zeal for God's house means guarding your own heart. It means always speaking that which builds and never that which tears down. It means obeying and praying for your leaders. It means considering the needs of others as more important than your own. Zeal for the temple of the living God means that there is nothing more important to you than working for the health and beauty of the Bride of Christ, protecting the integrity of her witness in this world.

Ultimately, holiness requires a death to self. Is that easy? Of course not. Sometimes, the process seems excruciating. This cartoon depicts two couples engaged in Bible study. One of the women is speaking. "Well," she says, "I haven't actually *died* to sin, but I did feel kind of faint once."

“It is true there is difficulty in entering into godliness. But this difficulty does not rise from the religion which begins in us, but only from the irreligion which is still there. If our senses were not opposed to penitence, and if our corruption were not opposed to the purity of God, there would be nothing in this painful to us. We suffer only in proportion as the vice which is natural to us resists supernatural grace ... But it would be very unfair to impute this violence to God, who is drawing us on, instead of to the world, which is holding us back.” - Blaise Pascal

C. How about Walking in Faith?

When I talk about walking by faith, I could mean not being afraid of tomorrow. I could mean not being afraid to attempt great things for God. I could mean trusting the promises of God more than you trust money, possessions and power. I could mean pouring your energies into the eternal purposes of God rather than into the successes and attainments that earn the respect of worldly people. But I suspect that one reason we struggle so much with walking by faith in those grandiose areas is because we give so little attention to “Walking by Faith 101”.

The first and often most daring step of “Walking by Faith 101” is obedience. We do not give God an opportunity to prove Himself in great ways when our faith is too meager simply to obey Him. Authentic faith obeys God in the little things of life before it ever moves His hand in the big things. What greater proof can there be of a man’s convictions about God than obedience? Is that not the best evidence of faith according to the eleventh chapter of Hebrews? Abraham left the country he knew for a new one. Noah built an ark. Moses refused to enjoy the luxuries of Egypt. Countless others chose horrendous persecution. Believing God is measured first by obeying God.

You are the temple of the living God, individually as believers, but more to the heart of this text, as a community of believers. What does that mean to you? What does that awaken in you? Does it make you hunger for true holiness and righteousness as a means of honoring God’s presence?

We live in an age of technology that could eventually cause everyone to become cautious, even paranoid as to how they conduct themselves everywhere at every moment. Who knows who might have a phone with a camera that records that you can get a little testy with the waitress or a bit surly with the neighbor? You might be this week’s star on *YouTube*.

Be careful how you live. Someone may be watching. What a concept. But, while this may be news to some, it should hardly come as a surprise to those of us who profess to believe the teachings of God’s Word, that individually and in community, they are temples of God.

In our dealings with people, we take comfort in the fact that only God sees the heart, but the truth in that statement is intended to be as sobering as it is comforting; God really does see my heart. Will I give my all to the pursuit of the holiness He demands? Will you give your all to making this church a place upon which people gaze and conclude, “God is really among them!”?