

THE UNEQUAL YOKE

Dear Ted,

I am an elder in a church in Australia that runs along very similar lines to PBC. We are a new church and are encountering the problem of Christians dating unbelievers then moving into a more serious relationship.

We have even had to apply church discipline to a couple who had moved in together (with success after much pain). Can you give me some scriptures other than the "unequal yoke" to help advise these people? We are serious about following the instructions of God's word.

BS

Bill,

Thanks for being patient. This is no easy subject to provide guidance on. Nearly all of the single brothers and sisters in our church, at one time or another, have had a difficult time being obedient to the Apostle Paul's exhortation to resist succumbing to being "unequally yoked". I suspect that the problem involves the whole of the Church.

Two things come to mind from my experience with this issue. The first is actually outside the Church and is a concept that all parents and single people are faced with every day: the customs of Western culture have changed. I'm not offering this observation as a cop-out but you can't help but have noticed that most single people in the world, owing to the tragically high number of divorces, now firmly believe that one would be mad to marry without first living with one's betrothed.. This is as fine an example of the sins of the fathers visiting the next generation that one could find anywhere. Those of us who have by the grace of God managed to stay married for years, are now nowhere near being in the majority. Failed marriages abound. It is easy to understand why even Christian single adults are seduced by the idea of a try-out arraignment. And who can blame them for their insecurities? We must face the fact that even among Christians, divorce is no longer uncommon.

The second issue concerns commitment. Among Christians I have heard countless complaints from single adults that all of the available mates are either divorced, emotionally immature or behave like people still in the world and only want to play house. Those that appear to be making an effort not to be unequally yoked with an unbeliever are soon and sometimes cruelly exposed as grossly indecisive individuals, so fearful of failure and the prohibition on remarriage that they can't get beyond the friendship stage of a relationship.

Single adults of both sexes live out the same vanity. In their younger years they think, "Is this the one? What if this is not the one?" as they reject one after the other of those whom God brings before them. They exchange what IS for a fantasy of what-might-be. Others in their mature years fret over long past possibilities and exchange the potential mates God brings into their lives for their fantasies of what might have been. Oh Lord, how sad it is. I would hate to be dating in these times.

Each one clutches their list of criteria with which to test those they meet, checking every prospect for the qualities that will reveal the perfect godly mate. The frustration of passing years and indecisive fears opens them to the temptation of a worldly and wider range of choices. Vanity is thy game's name.

In the beginning, as the single adult Christian ventures into the world, relationships seem to fall into two subdivisions: one for fun, the other for the day when it's time to settle down. Christians, because of their innocence, are usually added to the when-I-get-serious category. Some compromise their morality in an attempt at popularity. Those with a little wisdom recognize the value of their own character and are on the alert for those in search of a permanent commitment.

Now comes reality, rearing its lovely head of just right curls. But how is one to find out if this person will measure up to the list of qualities held so tightly in their clenched fist? Oh yes, they are all still sure they are holding firm to their faith and not merely to their appetites. Surprisingly they discover that their worldly semi-fiancées and semi-fiancés also have lists from which they check off virtues they hope for in a mate. Cautious but not much wiser, those who have endured the pain of divorce or betrayal are on the alert for signs in every word or gesture. Something that might warn of future doom. No longer holding behind a poker face that wild card they once embraced, "I can always leave". They vow to cut their losses and never again bet everything on a deal. Or they vow "never again", not realizing love is won like life by losing first your own.

"Are you mad?" the semi mates say, "We must live together because one never knows. Are we right, are we friends or foes?" Tempted like Adam and Eve, desiring knowledge but fearing loss (the devil's only hold), in unison across the land they seem to say, "Yes, let's try just a taste, a test, just to be sure and to avoid divorce's stigmatic stain. We will live together and we will know". So they say and so it goes, customs now have changed and single adults, short on commitment but long on a kind of hope, are setting up households in nearly every land. Of course those that can, do presume just a little on God's grace, praying every day for Him to save their beloved.

The lists, now held by refrigerator magnets, are checked daily for signs of prey. "Is he or she just using me? The doubting and testing are long under way. "Marriage is just a piece of paper", each reaffirms. Yet in every heart the fear of loss looms larger than before; the more you have, the more you can lose. Soon some kind of limit is reached. No one will risk going beyond a certain point of emotional involvement without a guarantee that the other will not leave on some stormy night. Most, if not all, discover that living together is not marriage, but what else can they do? The Church tells them "don't" and offers no "do".

I have often thought of how marriage is kind of like two people going in to a room together, locking the door and with no reservations, throwing away the key. But when two people live together, they both check the door every now and then. "What's that honey? Oh no, I'm not going anywhere, I was just checking the door to see if it still works." The door checking takes the form of yet another list. It's done by keeping a record of small wounds and wrongs each has suffered at the hands of the other. Believers have read, "Love does not keep a record of wrongs suffered..." (1Cor 13), so they find this kind of testing even more unsettling. When we keep a record of wrongs on another, it is a way of getting to the famous "last straw". One can not shout, "That's the last straw!", unless there has been a first, second and third.

Keeping a list of wrongs becomes an ace-in-the-hole, the just-in-case. It is very corrosive to all relationships. How can anyone believe that one's partner is committed to staying in the room forever if he or she is seen checking the door. The list of wrongs, the door checking, is a fully loaded automatic rationalization for leaving. Its very existence makes deep emotional growth toward one another way too risky. I would wager that the majority of those who began living with one another in an effort to reduce the fear of loss, actually fear loss more now than when they first moved in together. Each one fears that the other might leave; why else would they be checking the door?

The world of the worldly is no less filled with hidden fears of commitment than is the Church. Among those to whom marriage is "just a piece of paper", playing house more than once is becoming common. The believers, who very often are the broken hearted ones, like wind blown rose petals have begun to bring their faded glory back to the fellowship of believers. The number of mature single adults has begun to grow in many churches and most are wiser now. God is able to use their hurt. As Paul writes, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (Rom 8:28). Customs do change but God doesn't, and where Jesus is there is hope.

All of the above is why the passage about being "unequally yoked" doesn't seem to speak with much authority to those brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ who are living together on a trial basis. We who minister where this issue arises point to scripture and are surprised by the blank look we get in response. No wonder we get blank faces: what does a farmer with an ox problem have to do with them? They comfort themselves with their well-worn lists of signs, waving them in our faces to prove that surely anytime now their partner will accept Christ. And all we have to offer is, "Don't be unequally yoked". Surly this passage of scripture has more to say than that.

When those in Paul's day heard and pictured this warning, they saw it more vividly than we do now. The average man in Paul's time couldn't afford a matched set of oxen and had to buy them one at a time. For a season or two he had to endure, with sweat stinging his eyes, the frustration of trying to plow a straight furrow through a rocky field with the

older larger ox invariably pulling the unmatched pair in circles. Marriage is hard enough with matched pairs, it doesn't need to be rendered more difficult with the additional conflict of an unbelieving mate. It is more helpful to exegete a scripture rather than quote it as law; at least I get fewer blank stares.

Appeal to their sense of care: how can they say they love someone and not care about those whom their beloved loves. Of course, they will say they do love those their semi-betrothed loves. Ask if it's mutual, "Does your intended love Him whom you love?" To love a Christian is to love Jesus too. Jesus must become the issue, not who and how they want to go about marrying. If we merely persuade someone to outwardly conform to the commandments, all we've done is birthed another Pharisee. I repeat, Jesus must become the issue.

This is one of Paul's most graphic statements about immorality: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be!" (1 Cor 6:15). He said that Jesus doesn't wait outside when one goes to bed with a whore. Paul makes Jesus the issue because Jesus is the issue. It is Christ that is being unequally yoked, He isn't waiting back at the church. Christ Himself, as He did when He walked the earth, will make Himself an issue in any coupling. He will be a "problem" in all the test drive unions between Christians because He will make Himself a problem. You invite Jesus into your life and you can't get rid of Him. Thank God.

Make Jesus the issue, not the unequal yoke. Read the passage with that in mind and see how much more meaningful it is. Historically, some of us pastors have been known to use the scripture about the body being the temple of the Holy Spirit as a "No Smoking" sign. Talk about missing the point...

"Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, 'I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord. 'and do not touch what is unclean; And I will welcome you. And I will be a Father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,' Says the Lord Almighty".(2 Cor 6:14-18).

This part of Paul's letter was not written to prevent mismatched marriages. If we acknowledge that more than just a few of our single brothers and sisters are searching for mates outside of the church, then it is only symptomatic of a much deeper and far more serious problem. It is a problem that I suspect is directly related to the use of scripture to accomplish shallow outward conformity to the Law. No, I won't even dignify it as an attempt at low level legalism. It is not the Law that is held aloft but some vague localized cultural definition of what is expected of a "Christian".

The word of God is intended to edify the whole of the Church. We are all to come out from among "their midst and be separate". Are we only worldly in matters of marriage? Doesn't the log have to be removed from my own eye before the speck from my that of my brother? How goes it with the rest of the church? How is your congregation governed? Is it by the corporate model? Do messages from the pulpit exegete the politics of the government rather than the word of God? The world believes that if you want something badly enough you will get it. I have heard preachers call this faith.

I have heard the desires that fill our Christian hearts come spilling out of our mouths like the springs of fresh and brackish water James warned us against. Coveting is idolatry. Not the object coveted, but the coveting itself is idolatry. As Paul writes, "...covetousness, which is idolatry." (Col. 3:5). Is it possible that at the core, this is our unequal yoke? The living God walks among us, we are His people, bought with a price, and we can't stop wanting. How can it be that He has adopted us as His own children and made us heirs to all of His promises and we still want? Often I have asked Him for His will so that I may inspect it before I act. He knows His will, I only need to follow.

What is this "unclean" thing we must not touch? Is it my compromises, my adulterations? To be a good guy, I am worldly. I'm not easy going, I'm lawless. I'm not adjusting the light, I'm darkened. I'm not prioritized, I'm Belial's partner. I'm not ambitious, I'm idolatrous. I'm not doubting, I'm unbelieving. I'm not "believing God" for something, I'm unthankful.

In another example of badly applied scripture, we use the fearsome warnings of God's wrath in the first chapter of the book of Romans to mercilessly judge everyone from evolutionists to those who practice homosexuality. All the while we

overlook the thankless beam in our own eye and fail to notice what our transgression is in the first place: "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened." (Rom 1:21).

Coveting is idolatry because we won't give it up. Do we believe that if we stopped wanting for even a moment God would think we were satisfied and He would stop giving? Coveting is idolatry because we use it like a great gravitational magnet that will pull the things we want into the orbit of our lives. Coveting is idolatry because it is not thankfulness. Coveting is never content.

Back to where I started: single folks wanting/coveting a mate before it's too late are looking outside the Church. They covet with a list of semi-christlike qualities that the intended must have. They covet a guarantee that the other will be a semi-perfect match. They covet an imaginary person of their own design who is at best a narcissistic version of themselves, differing only in genitalia. They covet as they were taught to do.

There are countless books written on how to get things from God and only a very few on how to be content with what you have. It is popular among some Christians to get weekly fillings of what ever one imagines that our Lord didn't give them the week before. There is precious little evidence that these same folks did anything with what they received last week. Evangelism is not in style and homeless people wander the streets. On Christian television the heroes have the power to knock people to the floor but not the power to teach what it means to rest in Christ so that He might do what we can't do for our selves, "...come out from their midst and be separate,".

As Christians we honor God because He is worthy of honor, we honor and thank Him because we are not the children of His wrath, nor do we have foolish darkened hearts. We mate with others in His body because our Father arranges marriages. Single Christians can be comforted by the knowledge that He doesn't give anyone a snake who wants a fish:

"Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he?" (Luke 11:11).

Jesus is always the issue, Christ in us, the hope of glory.

Thanks for writing,

Ted Wise

tedwise@shafafa.com

"Christian thinking is a rare and difficult thing; so many seem unaware that the first commandment according to our Lord is, 'You shall love the lord your god with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" (Oswald Chambers)

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