**Separation and holiness** 30/1/22 dkm

Read: Isaiah 49:1-13, 2Corinthians 5:12-6:2

Text: 2Corinthians 6:11-7:4

Psalms: 31:1-7, 1,26:1-8, 134a

Back on the farm we had an old car that I and my brothers ‘bashed’ around the paddocks. The brakes were weak because brake fluid leaked from the cylinder; once my brother hit a cow and broke its leg! Brake fluid was hard to get, so I thought diesel would do the same job- and that was the end of the brakes! Growing up I was told that oil and water do not mix.

In the Christian life there are things that do not mix. The apostle Paul tells us not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. This is the main lesson here at the end of chapter 6. Paul may have been thinking of a law given by Moses: ‘You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together’ (Deut 22:10). Not only would such a yoking be painful for the animals but their plowing would have been a disaster. Christians who yoke themselves with unbelievers in worship or in marriage will come to grief with regard to their faith.

This passage brings to an end what some call ‘Paul’s digression’ which began back in 2:14; they say this because of the reference to Titus and to Macedonia in 2:13 and again in 7:5, 6. But the teaching of this ‘digression’ has been profound, as well as personal. Paul was facing attacks from some in the church at Corinth who did not like his teaching. They abused the freedoms of the gospel when it came to worship and sexuality. Those from a Jewish background probably thought Paul was being too liberal, while those from a pagan background felt he was being too strict. The newly arrived false teachers sought to discredit Paul to establish their own authority, and another gospel (cf.7:2). Paul desperately tried to prevent such a disaster.

In this section Paul makes a personal plea to the Corinthians to open their hearts to him, and a further plea for them to stop yoking themselves to unbelievers. He supports this teaching from Scripture, before making a further plea to be holy, and to be united with him in the bonds of the gospel.

**1. Plea to be open hearted**

‘O Corinthians!’ This is one of few occasions when the apostle Paul actually refers to those to whom he is writing by name; ‘O foolish Galatians!’ is another (Gal 3:1). He does this when deeply moved by love for his ‘children’. He is like a father expressing frustration with his son- ‘O Johnny, please listen to me!’ I recall a father being frustrated that his son was not working. He did everything he could find his son a job, but the truth is, ‘You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink’.

Paul was bending over backwards, trying to get the Corinthians to understand that he loved them sincerely, and wanted to help them in their spiritual life. He earnestly refuted suggestions that he was cheating them because he was corrupt and selfish. But he could not force them to love and respect him. All he could do was pray and plead, and open his own heart to them, as he does in this letter, especially in the first half of this chapter. He reminds them of the various paradoxes we face in the Christian life. We live in a fallen world so our honest words and sincere actions may be misconstrued and rejected. Paul was distressed that these believers were listening to corrupt, self-serving men and turning against Paul, their father in the faith.

We learn more about the man called Paul in this letter than in any of his other letters. This is because Paul was opening his heart to the Corinthians, trying to renew the relationship he had with them in the beginning. He was not hiding anything from them, and did not use deceptive or underhanded methods in his ‘ministry of reconciliation’ (5:18). He preached reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ, and reconciliation with one another, again in and through Jesus Christ. Satan is clever at destroying these relationships. By attacking the fellowship of believers, he can indirectly attack our relationship with God (2:11). The fellowship of believers at Corinth was under attack and Paul was desperate to restore it. Such fellowship must be based on truth, not lies. It must be open and not secretive.

Paul assures the Corinthians that he had opened his heart wide towards them and spoken openly (6:1). He pleads that they do the same with regard to him: ‘Now in return…you also be open’ (6:13). All he can do is plead and pray, as we just said. He pleads, ‘O Corinthians!’, and then refers to them as his children (6:11, 13). He denies having done anything to bring about the lack of trust on their part. They were the ones being restricted by their own affections/ feelings/emotions (6:12). Maybe they felt guilty for continuing to attend pagan temples. Secrets are inimical to any relationship.

**2.’Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers’**

You may have heard these words being quoted in relation to marriage. If not, then hear them now! Paul does not mention the word ’marriage’ but he does back in 1Corinthians 7, speaking of marriage ‘only in the Lord’ (1Cor 7:39). Moreover, everything he says here fits the marriage relationship. Sure, he tells those who have an unbelieving spouse to stay with them, but this is no excuse for knowingly marrying an unbeliever.

The apostle not only gives the command not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers, he explains ‘why’ in a series of rhetorical questions. Before looking at these, we will note that Paul was not just thinking of marriage. He was probably thinking of believers at Corinth who thought they were free to join unbelieving friends in idol worship. This idea may seem remote to us but is a reality for brothers and sisters in India. Many work in places and schools that have idols set up at the entrance for workers and students to ‘worship’ as they enter. We, of course, do face pressure to conform to immoral practices in the world place, if not open worship. Students need to be taught not to bow down to images or participate in corrupt worship in school. ‘Come out from among them and be separate’ says the Lord (6:17).

To be yoked with an unbeliever in worship or marriage is like having light and dark existing together; is this possible? If you say we have twilight, you are setting yourself up for a lot of stumbling? Paul bluntly declares, ‘What do righteousness and wickedness have in common?’ (6:14). We must understand that there are two types of people in the world, believers and unbelievers, children of God and children of Satan. We do not know everyone’s heart, and that does not matter in most circumstances. Paul does not advocate withdrawing from society to live in a Christian commune (1Cor 5:10). But in circumstances where our relationship is close and involves personal commitments, we need to know the beliefs and commitments of the other person. Otherwise we will soon face situations where our faith in Christ will be on the line. We will be asked by the Lord, ‘Do you love me more than these?’ Paul’s command is for the good of our relationship with the Lord.

Rhetorical questions continue: ‘What accord has Christ with Belial?’ (6:15). Remember the words, ‘If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation’ (5:17). When we believe, Christ by his Spirit comes to live in our hearts. We become the children of God. Unbelievers, on the other hand, are children of Satan. We read of Christ’s interaction with Satan in the desert; it was brief and unpleasant. Any heart relationship between believer and unbeliever will be the same, brief and unpleasant, unless of course, there is compromise.

‘What part has a believer have with an unbeliever?’ is the next question put to us by the apostle (6:15). And then, ‘What agreement has the temple of God with idols?’ (6:16). What is the temple of God? The Corinthians were very familiar with pagan temples and idols. While Paul told the Christians it was okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols without asking questions, he did not permit them to join in feasts associated with idol worship. The Judaizers probably criticised Paul for even allowing believers to eat meat sacrificed to idols (cf. Acts 15:29).

Paul told the Corinthians to ‘flee idolatry’, just as he told them to ‘flee sexual immorality’. In this context, Paul spoke of believer’s body being the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 6:19), and also of their church being the temple of God (1Cor 3:16). So when he writes, ‘You are the temple of God’ in verse 16 he is referring to the assembly of believers. God is holy and he hates all carved images. Christian worship is as different to pagan worship as light is to darkness. There can be no compromise, no joining with unbelievers in worshipping their gods or idols. We must be discerning about joining hands with unbelievers, even if it is for a good cause.

**3. Defer to Scripture**

Paul believed the Bible to be the inspired word of God (2Tim 3:16). He derived his doctrine from the Bible, and used Scripture to support his teaching. The principle of separation, of not being unequally yoked with unbelievers, is found in the OT. The Lord established his holy nation in the land of Goshen, before bringing them out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan, where he commanded them to maintain separation from surrounding nations in terms of worship and marriage. Paul quotes from Leviticus 26:11, 12 the words with which the Lord declared his covenant with his people: God would be their God and they would be his people, to the exclusion of all others. God would dwell among his people, not as one of many gods but as their one and only God.

In a further selection of OT verses, the apostle supports his teaching on separation, on God’s people being holy and pure in His sight. The first, from Isaiah 52, relates to the Lord bringing his people out of pagan Babylon, where he had sent them for punishment. They were to leave quickly, taking only the holy vessels for the temple in Jerusalem. The second comes from 2Samuel 7:14 where the Lord promises to be a Father to the son of David.

The principle of separation set down for the people of the OT temple remains valid for the people for the NT church. God is still a holy God who will not give his glory to another. Our world pressures us to be inclusive, to accept everyone no matter what their beliefs or behaviour, but this woke policy is obviously failing.

God’s promise to you a believer, and to us his church is, ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’. God is holy, so his people must be holy, as we are when cleansed of our sin by the blood of Christ. Paul refers to the ‘filthiness of the flesh and spirit’, of body and mind, while calling us to be holy in the fear of God (7:1). This is a very high calling but one that is possible, and indeed essential, for one who has been washed in the precious blood of Christ (Rev 1:5).

**4. Plea to be open hearted**

Our fourth and final subheading is the same as the first because Paul repeats his plea as he closes this section of his letter: ‘Open your hearts to us’ (7:2). The majority in the church had been influenced by a vocal, anti-Paul minority. But they were persuaded, probably by Titus, to heed what Paul wrote and discipline the sexual offender in their church (2:6). Paul urges them to go a step further and reject the lies being spread about him by the minority. With a sincere heart, Paul assures them that he has neither wronged them, nor corrupted, nor cheated anyone. Clearly, these were unfounded charges being levelled at him by people who were corrupt and self-serving themselves.

Paul does not condemn those being swayed by the vocal minority; he just urges them to listen to him rather than these rebels. He assures the believers that he has them in his heart. He saw them as being in the same position, the same ‘boat of Christ’ as it were, so that they would either live together or die together (7:3). We are reminded of the marriage vow, ‘Until death do us part’- although death does not part believers in Christ.

Paul closes by praising them, by ‘boasting’ on their behalf, before expressing a sense of personal comfort and joy, in the belief, it seems, that they will open their hearts to him, and join him in whatever suffering they may face at the hands of the rebels and false teachers in their church.