

# The Temple of the Living God

*2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1*

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## Introduction

We continue our study in the book of 2 Corinthians, the letter Paul the Apostle wrote to the church in Corinth around 57 AD. The context of the letter is a reconciliation between Paul and the church. Paul planted the church in Corinth around 50 AD and remained there for almost two years. After he left, false apostles came who preached a salvation of works righteousness and did everything they could to discredit him — to the point that when Paul made a brief visit to Corinth in 55 AD, the church shunned him. In response, Paul wrote a letter we no longer have, which led the church to repent. Upon hearing of their repentance and their longing to see him, Paul writes the letter of comfort and reconciliation we know as 2 Corinthians.

The first five chapters are Paul’s response to his critics. To those who questioned his leadership, he answers that his aim is to please God and seek their good. To those who doubted his love, he answers by forgiving the very man who had wronged him. To those who challenged his credentials, he points to the Spirit of God at work in them and in him. To those who saw his suffering as evidence of God’s disfavor, he answers that it is precisely through his weakness that God’s glory becomes most visible. And to those who questioned his dedication in the face of repeated failure, he answers that he is living for eternity, not for the approval of this world.

After answering these criticisms, Paul calls them to the gospel of Jesus Christ once again. In 5:14 he writes:

“*For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died.*”

And in 5:17:

“*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*”

And then comes the great plea: “*We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God*” (5:20). And, “*Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation*” (6:2).

This vertical, heavenly reconciliation with God must now manifest itself horizontally in a person's relationships with others. And so Paul shifts gears to speak about their relationship with him and with one another. In 6:11–13 he writes: “*We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open... widen your hearts also.*” And just a few verses later, in 7:2: “*Make room in your hearts for us.*” Be reconciled to God, and be reconciled to us.

This leads us to the extraordinarily important spiritual principle at the heart of our passage today: your relationship with God shapes your relationship with others. Specifically, your walk with God is reflected in whom you walk with. Your fellowship with God is revealed in the company you keep. This is our passage: 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1.

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## **The Covenant and the Call**

The underlying context of everything Paul is discussing in 2 Corinthians is that in Christ there is a new covenant with God — and a covenant is about relationship. The best image we have for understanding what a covenant is, and therefore what Paul is doing here, is the marriage covenant. So let us begin there before we turn to the text.

At the start of every wedding, there is what is called a declaration of intent. It is the moment when the bride and groom, standing together, declare their intention of entering a marriage covenant with one another. The preacher asks: *Is it your intention here today to wed this woman as your wife, so that from this day you will live together in the holy covenant of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health — will you open your heart to her — forsaking all others, and keeping yourself only for her so long as you both shall live?*

The whole purpose of the marriage covenant is to define and establish a relationship that is unique and unlike all other relationships. When the bride and groom say “I do,” they are promising to love the other in such a special, deep, and life-giving way that it requires them also to promise to forsake loving anyone else in that same way. But this covenant principle — this forsaking of others — does not apply only to the marriage covenant. It applies equally to the new covenant established by Christ Jesus.

Entering the new covenant with him requires a forsaking of others. This is precisely what Paul is calling the church in Corinth to do.

*“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?” (2 Corinthians 6:14–16)*

The image of being unequally yoked comes from the law — specifically, the command not to plow a field with an ox and a donkey sharing the same yoke (Deuteronomy 22:10). It simply does not work. And that agricultural image became a broader picture of Israel whenever they went after idols. You cannot do what God has called you to do and to be when you are yoked — joined, bound in relationship — with those who do not know God or who reject him.

“Belial,” in verse 15, is a wordplay on a Hebrew word meaning “worthless” or “worthless things.” The Lord God has never struck a bargain with idols. He has never entered a truce or an accord with them. There is absolutely no place for the worship of the one true God alongside the idols of this world or the false loves that compete for our devotion.

Now, this passage is often applied to marriage — and rightly so. If you are a follower of Jesus, you should not date or marry a person who is not. Do not be unequally yoked.

But Paul is not only talking about marriage here. He is talking about something broader: the whole architecture of relational life. Followers of Jesus should not be relationally yoked — bound in partnership, fellowship, deep accord — with those who do not believe or follow Jesus. He is not saying withdraw from society or refuse to engage with unbelievers. What he is saying is that your relationships shape who you are. They define your dreams and hopes. They give you your life goals and ambitions. They define your sense of self, determine your direction, and give you your sense of right and wrong. Therefore, know who your friends are.

When Paul says, *“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers,”* he is asking about more than who you fall in love with and marry. He is asking about who your closest friends are — the community you find your identity in, the voices you turn to first when life falls apart, the counsel you seek when facing the biggest decisions of your life, the people whose approval you most need and most fear losing. These are the relationships Paul is telling the church in Corinth — and telling us — must not be unequally yoked. Not because unbelievers are beneath us, not because we withdraw from the world in fear, but because of what Paul says at the end of verse 16.

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## The Temple of the Living God

“For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’” (2 Corinthians 6:16)

This is breathtaking. When Paul wrote these words, the temple in Jerusalem still stood. In 57 AD it would have been at its height of glory and splendor — one of the great wonders of the ancient world. Yet Paul points not to the temple in Jerusalem as the place where God dwells, but to the church, to followers of Jesus filled with his Spirit: *we* are the temple of the living God.

To grasp the full weight of this, we need to understand the story of the temple.

The Bible tells us that history begins with God creating the heavens and the earth and placing man and woman in the garden to be his image-bearers and stewards. There in the garden, man and woman walked with God. There was no need for a temple, because God’s presence and glory dwelt in their midst. But because of sin, man and woman became separated from God, cast out from his presence, alienated from his glory. And because of that separation, the image-bearers of God began to worship false images, and creation itself fell under the curse.

But God, in his mercy and grace, called the people of Israel into a covenant with him — a covenant in which the high and holy God who had dwelt apart from his people would now come and dwell *with* his people, manifested in the shekinah glory. This is the story of the book of Exodus. The Lord not only delivered his people from bondage but brought them into a relationship with himself in which he would dwell among them. And the means by which the holy God would dwell with his people was the tabernacle — later to become the temple. The book of Exodus describes in extraordinary detail everything that had to happen for the construction and consecration of this dwelling place. And when it was all done, the shekinah glory of God descended, and God dwelt among his people.

This is what Paul is quoting when he writes: “*I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*” He is drawing a direct line to that tabernacle in the wilderness. That was the whole point of the covenant — that was what made Israel different from all the peoples of the earth. Not the law, not the food they ate or avoided, not the clothes they wore, but the glory of God dwelling in their midst. Yet, as Paul writes elsewhere, they “*exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things*” (Romans 1:23). Instead of separating themselves from the lies of this world, they became like everyone else. And this happened not just once, but over and over again across seven centuries, until God said, “*Enough.*” As Isaiah declares: “*I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols*” (Isaiah 42:8).

Around 590 BC, the glory of God departed the temple. This is recorded in Ezekiel chapters 10 and 11, where Ezekiel is given a vision of God’s glory moving eastward — down through the Kidron Valley and up over the Mount of Olives. And within a year of the glory’s departure, the Babylonians destroyed the temple.

Seventy years later, the temple was rebuilt — but the books of Ezra and Nehemiah contain no mention of the glory of God filling it. Then, under Herod the Great, the temple was enlarged and expanded into one of the wonders of the age — but again, no mention of God’s glory filling it.

Until the day when a man named Jesus — whom we are told is “*the exact image of the invisible God*” and “*the radiance of the glory of God*” (Hebrews 1:3) — rode a donkey up over the Mount of Olives, down the hill, through the Kidron Valley, and entered the physical temple of Jerusalem. The glory of God had returned to the temple, and it returned by precisely the same path by which it had departed.

But what did Jesus find? He found that the corruption of that place had never left. It had become a den of thieves. And a week later, after overturning the tables and pointing to himself as the true temple, he was crucified. But true to his own prophetic word — “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*” (John 2:19–21) — he rose again, God with us.

And according to the good purpose of God, the Spirit of God was poured out upon all who believe and confess the name of Jesus. The church, the body of Christ, became the temple of God. Through the Spirit given to us, God dwells in us. This is why Paul says: *we are the temple of the living God.*

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## **Come Out and Be Separate**

Because we are the temple of the living God, Paul continues:

“*Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then 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 Corinthians 6:17–18)

Paul is quoting Isaiah 52:11, which in its original context is the Lord calling his exiled people out of Babylon. *Come out. Leave. Do not carry with you the unclean things of Babylon. Separate yourself from the worthless things that hold people in bondage.* The dwelling place of God’s glory requires this.

And then comes one of the most staggering promises in all of Scripture. The Lord who spoke the worlds into existence — the Lord before whom the seraphim veil their faces and cry *holy, holy, holy* — the Lord Almighty, the *Παντοκράτωρ*, the one who holds all things in his sovereign hand — that Lord says to you: *I will be a Father to you. You shall be my son. You shall be my daughter.* Nothing in this world can give you what God is offering you here. This is the relational promise of the new covenant.

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## Holiness as Response, Not Requirement

Therefore Paul says:

“*Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.*”  
(2 Corinthians 7:1)

Please notice the grace in what Paul says. He does not say, “*In order to have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves.*” He says, “*Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves.*” This work of cleansing is not done to get something from God. It is done because we already have him. You do not separate yourself from the worthless things of this world in order to earn the Father’s embrace. You separate yourself because you have already been embraced. You pursue holiness not to become a son or daughter, but because you already are one.

When Paul speaks of “*bringing holiness to completion,*” he means this: becoming what you have already been declared to be. Go back to 5:21 — “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” The gospel is that Jesus takes your sin and gives you his righteousness. Through the righteousness of Christ — a righteousness that is not yours but his — you are seen and declared righteous before God.

But here is the promise Paul is pointing us toward: that which is declared becomes ontologically true. Not only are we declared holy and righteous through the work of Christ — through the work of Christ and his Spirit in us, we also *become* holy and righteous. The glory of God dwelling in the temple does not leave the temple unchanged. If the Spirit of God is in you, you will be changed. Through Christ, righteousness is given; by the Spirit, righteousness is lived. The Bible calls this sanctification.

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## The Table of the New Covenant

Today is Communion Sunday. And it is here at this table that we hear Jesus say: *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me”* (1 Corinthians 11:25). This table is a reminder not only of what Jesus has done for us — our forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life — but also that we are in a covenant with him, a relationship with him, that makes us children of God. *I will be a Father to you. You shall be my son. You shall be my daughter.*

As we come to the table today, I invite you to sit for a moment with some relational questions.

Who are you in friendship with? Who is shaping you? Who or what has your heart become yoked to? What voice has more influence over you than the voice of Christ? What loves do you hold greater than the love of God?

If you find in your reflection that you are yoked — bound in deep fellowship — with things or people who are not in fellowship with the Lord, I invite you to use this time to confess, to ask for wisdom, and to draw near to the Lord and ask him for help.

We do not come to this table to earn what he has already given. We come because we have been embraced. Come to the table of the Lord.

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## Responsive Reading

**Leader:** From the beginning, God’s desire has been to dwell with his people —

**People:** To walk among them, to be their God, and to call them his own.

**Leader:** But sin drove us from his presence, and we exchanged his glory for worthless things —

**People:** Yet in his mercy, he did not abandon us.

**Leader:** He sent his Son, the radiance of his glory, who entered our darkness and bore our sin —

**People:** So that in him, we might become the righteousness of God.

**Leader:** Through his Spirit poured out upon all who believe,

**People:** We are the temple of the living God.

**Leader:** Therefore he calls us to come out, to be separate, to touch no unclean thing —

**People:** Not to earn his love, but because we have already received it.

**Leader:** He who spoke the worlds into existence, before whom the seraphim cry holy —

**People:** That Lord says to us: I will be a Father to you. You shall be my sons and daughters.

**Leader:** Since we have these promises, beloved —

**People:** Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

**All:** We do not come to this table to earn what he has already given. We come because we have been embraced. We are the temple of the living God. To him be all glory.