

What Does It Mean to Be Unequally Yoked with Unbelievers?

“How do you pick up the threads of an old life? How do you go on, when in your heart, you begin to understand, there is no going back? There are some things that time cannot mend. Some hurts that go too deep.”

*When Frodo Baggins says these words at the end of the movie *The Return of the King*, they carry the full weight of someone who is grieving deeply. These words echo some of my relationships. I often wonder: “With all the damage that has been done, how can we ever return to how things used to be?” And, “Was there ever really anything to our friendship at all?”*

This is how Paul must have felt when he wrote 2 Corinthians. In this deeply personal letter, Paul offers profound insights into relationships. He writes out of both love and pain. He writes about severing relationships and mending them. He writes in a way that is decidedly centered on God, as seen in the person of Christ. Paul is humble and meek; he is bold and adamant.

Cutting ties with darkness

When Paul says, “Do not be unequally yoked,” he means first, that we should not associate with believers who don’t live for Jesus, and second, that engaging in any sort of intimate relationship or partnership with someone who does not let Jesus be the center of their lives will ultimately lead to our demise (2 Cor 6:14). We must cut ties with whatever or whoever leads us to darkness.

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Paul intends for believers to engage with people who don’t share their beliefs; he just doesn’t want to see their relationships lead them into darkness. The Corinthian believers are supposed to be changing the world, not to be changed by it. Paul wants to see the Corinthian believers separate from their old way of living and fully embrace the ways of Jesus.

But this is complicated: There are false leaders, and old friends turned enemies and broken relationships. There are questions about Paul’s motives and ministry. He is essentially standing on trial before a body of believers that he planted himself, and he knows that they are the ones unable to stand the test of authenticity (2 Cor 10:7–8; 12:19–21; 13:5–8). And nothing with the Corinthians is clear; it’s opaque and in the shadows. Paul has to wade through the gray areas of life to find answers. And isn’t that exactly how life is for all of us?

A heretic never says, “I’m a heretic.” A deceiver never alerts you to his true intentions, and a friend can turn on you at any moment. A family member, or even a spouse, can betray your trust. Authenticity and reliability are hard to find, and so are real friends. Giving each other the benefit of the doubt is far from the norm. And correctly asserting truth, without standing in judgment of someone else, is decidedly difficult.

Paul’s response teaches us much about how to work through troubled relationships. He shows us that we cannot truly know another person without first knowing ourselves. And we cannot overcome our demons without first separating ourselves from the work of Satan. To be set free, we have to cut ties with the darkness—and Paul tells us how. To combat the darkness, Paul ultimately shows us a better way: We are not meant to pick up the threads of our old sinful lives at all; instead, we’re called to rebuild our lives on the redemption we find in Jesus.

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It is only in God that we can find completion—wholeness. Anything less than our God will just leave us broken. People can’t fill the God-sized hole in our hearts. Paul states that if we cleanse ourselves from

defilement, then holiness will be brought to completion (2 Cor7:1). We need our hearts to be cleansed by the living God—“the Son of God who bled and died and rose again for me.”

Christians have to make many difficult decisions, and many of them are based on our relationships. What relationships should we maintain? Which relationships are okay to let go of? And when should we cut ties with someone? Whenever we are being led astray by God, we must make changes, no matter how difficult those changes are.