



SINGLES' SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – 2 Corinthians 6:11-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 11) We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. (v. 12) There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. (v. 13) In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also. (v. 14) Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? (v. 15) What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? (v. 16) What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (v. 17) Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, (v. 18) and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

In the tradition of African American churches in the United States of America, marriage is a ubiquitous expectation for single black men and black women. Single black men and black women are not only expected to marry, but are expected to “marry in the Lord.” Before the presupposition of marriage, there must be a presupposition of good, nurturing relationships. What are the qualities of good relationships and possibly marriages that are equally yoked as opposed to being unequally yoked? While singles should not be viewed as incomplete, unfulfilled people, it is a legitimate task to explore the implications of singles being equally yoked in their relationships.

Theologically, Singles’ Sunday is significant in the context of relationships towards God, individuals, and communities of faith. The notion of being yoked suggests an action of bonding and coming together. In the quest of seeking relationships that are mutually edifying and beneficial, it is essential for singles to avoid unequally yoked relationships. Unequally yoked relationships have the potential to harm one’s relationship with God and one’s self. Furthermore, unequally yoked relationships are counterintuitive to the purpose of good relationships. These unequal relationships can create a catastrophe in other dimensions of a person’s life such as: education, family, finances, religion, and spirituality.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 2 Corinthians 6:11-18

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

My parents, Stanley and Joyce Talbert, have substantially impacted my understanding of this text in embodying their love for each other, for my siblings and me, and for God in their marriage. In a society where divorce is prevalent and many African American children are growing up in single parent homes, I do not take this for granted.

My experience in the Churches of Christ has also shaped my reading of this text. As a people who highly regard God’s revelation in Scripture, I approach this text as an expositor using tools of hermeneutics to hear God’s word, while also being radically open to the Spirit.

Living in the concrete jungle of New York City has had a major impact on my reading of 2 Corinthians 6:11-18 as well. As a single African American male, I am just one of the many thousands of singles who populate New York City. When reading 2 Corinthians, I cannot help but compare Corinth to New York City in that they both are wealthy cities, they are geographically close to bodies of water, they are both ethnically diverse, and they also have a myriad of religions.

With so many singles expressing themselves artistically, pursuing dreams, and networking in a diverse, pluralistic society, avoiding the notion of being unequally yoked becomes all the more relevant and difficult.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The second letter to the saints at Corinth, written by Paul an Apostle, appears to be a whirlwind of “blessings and curses” to the 21st-century reader, as Paul expresses his love to the Corinthians while simultaneously chastising them. The reader is allowed to see Paul’s love to the Corinthian church in continuity to 1 Corinthians as he exhorted them to be unified as one body of Christ. The challenge that the author of 2 Corinthians 6:11-18 has for the church at Corinth is relative to the exhortation of unity seen in 1 Corinthians. While members in the body of Christ are rebuked for being divided in 1 Corinthians, members in the body are encouraged to not be mismatched, or unequally yoked (no unity) with unbelievers.

In verse 14, what did the writer mean when he said, “Do not be mismatched with unbelievers?” This imperative is not to one individual but is to a community of believers.

The word that is used for mismatched in the Greek language is *heterozugeo*.¹ This means to yoke up differently, associate discordantly. It is a compound of *heteros*, similar the English hetero (heteronomous, heterosexual) meaning another of a different kind, and *zugoo*, which means to yoke.

The yoke was a tool used to bind two animals together in order to plow a field or execute a particular task in which the two animals could be productive. It appears that the writer is saying that having mismatched partnerships does not create mutual productivity. It was crucial for the yoke to be placed on two animals that were of the same stature in order for the animals to be productive. This is highlighted in a key verse that may have been a backdrop for the writer. Deuteronomy 22:10 was a command to not plow with an ox and a donkey together.

Verses 14b-16 rhetorically reinforce the meaning of 14a. As antonyms to the word mismatch in verse 14a, the writer uses the words partnership and fellowship in verse 14b, share in verse 15, and agreement in verses 15 and 16. These words—partnership, fellowship, share, and agreement—exemplify the function of a yoke. With a yoke, oxen are in partnership, fellowship, sharing, and agreement.

As believers are not supposed to be mismatched with unbelievers, the writer follows the same pattern in verses 14b-16, arguing the absurdity of yoking contrary binaries. The construct of believers versus unbelievers is paralleled in verses 14b-16 with similar constructs such as righteousness versus lawlessness, light versus darkness, Christ versus Beliar, and the temple of God versus idols. These pairings serve to show that believers being unequally yoked is as paradoxical as the above examples.

In the immediate context surrounding the chosen text, it appears that the working together with Christ precedes the mismatched partnerships (6:1). As opposed to unbelievers, believers are to work with Christ as God gives grace. Paul then mentions the work of ministry and its hardships. Just as two oxen plow a field together, believers and Christ plow the field of ministry. The writer says in 1 Corinthians 6:4-5: “but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger.” In

the difficult and celebratory times of ministry, Christ is the best partner for the believers to have, and not unbelievers.

Furthermore, the writer gives a profound theological insight about the notion of the yoke in verses 16-18 by appropriating the way that God lived among the Israelites and the way that God lives among the church community. As the people in the church were the temple of the living God, they could not be mismatched with unbelievers while simultaneously being matched with God. This is reinstated when the writer uses Isaiah to call the people to holiness. The final image of this text is a partnership between a father and his sons and daughters. Verse 18 shows that God is “*yoked*” and in partnership with God’s sons and daughters when they are not in partnership with idols, false gods, and those things that are unholy and unclean.

In the context of Singles’ Sunday, 2 Corinthians 6:11-18 is particularly important because it encourages singles to participate in relationships that will be mutually beneficial and bring glory to God. As this letter was written to a collective group, the application can be for singles as a collective in African American churches. As singles navigate through the obstacles, pains, and joys of life, it is important to be in partnership with people who will build up and not tear down. It is important that singles who have the strength of an ox not be partnered with people who have the strength of a donkey. The donkey will hold the ox back, hold the ox down, and hurt the ox, and they will both be counterproductive. Some singles have settled for donkeys while dating, in pursuit for marriage, in spiritual activities, and even secular activities. These mismatched partnerships have resulted in divorce, pain, abuse, crime, drug abuse, alcoholism, and all types of setbacks that make the two unproductive. Avoiding these unequally yoked partnerships is crucial.

Celebration

Knowing that we have a partnership with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to celebrate this relationship in difficult and joyous times. This partnership sparks a spiritual fire of zeal that inspires us to participate in relationships that will build up people and glorify God. When we have seen the remarkable things that have been accomplished through the partnership of God and God’s people in biblical history, we are inspired to joyfully continue in that partnership, avoiding mismatched partnerships. Singles can rejoice in that they are not doomed to mismatched relationships that will hold them back, but through Christ, singles can have relationships that are both edifying and productive.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The zealous, cautious voice of a father to his children (Paul, God in vv. 11-13, 16-18); and

Sights: The mismatching/ yoke between believers and unbelievers; an ox and a donkey yoked together in an agricultural setting (v. 14); and light vs. darkness (v. 15).

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

- It would be good to emphasize the idea of not only avoiding unequal relationships but also pursuing beneficial relationships. These relationships may or may not be intimate.
- “There cannot be an us without a them. Fellowship creates a necessary distinction between those who do not walk in the light and those who do. While there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them,’ we cannot be like them but we still must love them.” — Minister David E. Wilson

Note

1. Zodhiates, Spiros. AMG’s Annotated Strong’s Dictionaries (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2009).