

INTRODUCTION

You may notice there is something strange about me today. I know I’m always a little strange, but look on the bright side—you get to see me at my best. I’m a pretty strange in the daytime, but as Frank Sinatra said, I’m even stranger in the night!

Okay, so you’ve noticed I’m wearing two different kinds of shoes today—it’s to demonstrate the main point of this message. I want you to see this truth with your own eyes. You might say I want you to see a shoe sermon. Wow, that’s almost a tongue twister! Let’s all try saying this three times: “She sees a shoe sermon.”

I’m wearing these mismatched shoes because the Bible warns about the danger of getting into relationships where we are spiritually mismatched with another person. The actual words are, “Don’t be yoked together with unbelievers.” Most of us can’t relate to a yoke, because it was an ancient farm instrument. But I think all of us can understand what it means to wear mismatched shoes. So, after looking at my two mismatched shoes for the next thirty minutes, if you still don’t get the point of this message ... then I guess the yoke’s on you.

One of the greatest words in the human language is the word “relationship.” We all are looking for help with our relationships, that’s one reason why Dr. Charles Lowery, who spoke here two weeks ago is in such demand. He’s a relationship coach. Some relationships we have are wonderful and give us life, while others are harmful. The title of this message is “radioactive relationships” to remind us that just as radiation exposure can be hazardous to your health, there are some relationships that can be hazardous to your spiritual health.

2 Corinthians 6:14- 7:1. “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said [3 Old Testament quotations]: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.’ [Jeremiah 32:38] ‘Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.’ [Isaiah 52:11] ‘I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,’ says the Lord Almighty.’ [2 Samuel 7:14] Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”

Based upon these passages, I want to talk to you about two kinds of relationships. One is a dangerous relationship and the other is a dynamic relationship. First let me warn you about:

1. DESTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS: LINKED TO UNBELIEVERS

Our text says plainly, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” A yoke was a wooden harness in which two animals would be linked together and forced to function as one. The background for this verse is found in Deuteronomy 22:10 where the Bible says, “Do not plow

with an ox and a donkey yoked together.” There were several reasons for this prohibition. For instance, to the Jews, an ox was clean animal, but a donkey was unclean. An ox and a donkey have different natures. An ox is usually hard-working and cooperative, while a donkey was feisty and stubborn. Could you imagine how hard it would be to plow with an ox and a donkey? That’s the picture Paul uses, but since few of us live have ever yoked animals together, the metaphor may be lost on us. That’s why I’m wearing two mismatched shoes. Just as an ox and a donkey would be mismatched in a yoke, there are some radioactive relationships where Christians can be mismatched with unbelievers.

Ray Stedman wrote: “It is a cruel thing to yoke together two things of incompatible natures. There are certain associations that Christians have with unbelievers that constitute a yoke, and these associations are a certain cause for misery and shame in a Christian's life. We are to avoid them. They will hinder us, limit us, bind us and keep us from enjoying the fullness God has in mind for us. They are like trying to mix oil and water.” What does it mean to be “unequally yoked?” Let’s start with what it *doesn’t* mean.

(1) This DOESN’T mean: Separating yourself physically from the world

Through the years, some Christians have read the words, “Come out from among them and be separate” to mean they should completely retreat from the world. That’s why the monasteries were built in the Middle Ages. To thousands of people, Christianity meant taking some kind of vow and leaving the world to live in the solitude of a monastery.

There is a funny story about a monk who joined a monastery and took an oath of silence. The monks could only speak two words a year. After the first year the monk went to the leader and said, “Bed hard.” Another year passed and the monk went back to the leader and said, “Soup cold.” A third year passed and the monk visited the leader and said, “I quit.” The leader said, “I don’t blame you because all you ever do is complain.”

No, the Jesus made it clear that we are not to retreat from this world; rather we are kept in this world for a reason. Jesus said, “My prayer is not that you would take them out of the world but that you would protect them ... They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.” (John 17:15-16).

We’re IN the world, but we’re not OF the world. That means we aren’t to be isolated from the world, but we are to be insulated from the world. Think of it this way: A boat is IN the water, but it’s not OF the water. Like a boat, we’re in the world, but if the world gets in us, it’s like water getting into a boat.

(2) This DOESN’T mean: Refusing to have friendships with unbelievers

Others have taken this verse to mean a Christian shouldn’t have *any* kind of relationship with an unbeliever. Some Christian groups huddle up in their own little world and consider everything and everyone in the world to be evil and any kind of contact is to be avoided at all costs.

Jesus taught that we should have relationships with unbelievers; how else are we going to share

the love of Christ with them? We aren't called to be monks; we're called to be missionaries! During His three-year ministry on earth, it's clear Jesus hung out with sinners.

Jesus prayed: "As You have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." (John 17:18) in response to the criticism of some of the religious. "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners.'" (Luke 7:34). Jesus came into the world to seek and to save those who were lost. He came into the world to win the world. Really, the only business you and I have in the world is to win the world—to share the love of Christ.

I encourage you to make friends with people who don't know the Lord. Build bridges of friendship with them and then walk across that bridge and deliver the best news they'll ever hear. Just remember this important distinction: You can have FRIENDSHIP with an unbeliever, but you can't have true FELLOWSHIP with an unbeliever. Fellowship happens when two people are both in Christ. So your goal for every friendship with an unbeliever is to help them get to a place where you can have fellowship with them as a brother or sister in Christ.

(3) This DOES mean: Avoiding partnerships with unbelievers

To be "yoked" means to be tied to someone in a close, intimate, relationship; not just a casual friendship. To be "yoked" with someone means you are partners with someone over an extended period of time in which you share priorities, goals, dreams, and values. Two kinds of partnerships that I think this applies to is marriage, and business partnerships.

I like Eugene Petersen's paraphrase: "Don't become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That's not partnership, that's war. Is light best friends with darkness? Does Christ go strolling with the Devil? Do trust and mistrust hold hands?" (2 Corinthians 6:14 *The Message*)

There's an obvious reason why God warns us away from these kinds of mismatched relationships. Proverbs is full of warnings about this, but here's a simple one from 1 Corinthians 15:33, "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'"

The Bible says it is unwise for a Christian to marry an unbeliever. Now, the Bible also makes it very clear in 1 Corinthians 7 that if you are currently married to an unbeliever, you don't have permission to leave them for this reason. This passage applies to single people who may be looking for a mate. As simply as I know how to say it, if you are a Christian, you should seek to be married to another believer.

Some of you may be thinking, "What does the Bible say about dating a non-Christian?" Nothing. Because the Bible doesn't say anything about dating. Period. Dating is part of our Western culture, and in Bible times, as is still the case in many Eastern cultures today, marriages were arranged by the parents. But if dating is the process of seeking a mate, then I would encourage you to date only those guys and gals who would be considered a potential mate.

At this point, I know I've lost some of you who are thinking, "C'mon, pastor! Don't be so old-

fashioned! I’m dating a non-Christian because I want to lead him or her to the Lord.” Let me just tell you that in 37 years of preaching, I have found that in 99% of the cases, missionary dating doesn’t work. When you throw in hormones, romance, and a bunch of other stuff, what usually happens is the Christian gets pulled down to the level of the unbeliever. The reason for that is what I call “the gravity of depravity.” If I stood on this stool and had you come up on stage and I said, “I’ll try to pull you up on the stool, and you try to pull me down.” Who do you think would win? Someone much weaker than me could pull be down, because they’d have gravity working in their favor. So, do yourself a favor and date and marry someone who shares the same spiritual values you do. If you don’t you’ll be like these two shoes—mismatched.

If you form a business partnership with an unbeliever, you may also be asking for trouble because that other person doesn’t share the same spiritual values you embrace. I’m not talking about those of you who work with unbelievers on the job, or are assigned to them by your company. I think this principle could be applied when you enter into a binding business relationship with someone that forces you to accept the other partners’ goals and values. I’ve known dozens of Christians who’ve been burned through the years—and I’ve also known dozens of people who claimed to Christians who burned their partners. It’s like mismatched shoes. It’s like an ox and a donkey in a yoke. It’s like being exposed to radioactive fallout: It may not happen overnight, but it has a slow and gradual effect on you.

In the early morning hours of April 26, 1986 a reactor at the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, Russia overheated and exploded. The initial explosion was only a fraction of the size of the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan at the end of WWII, but the amount of radiation released was 400 times greater than that released by the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. At Chernobyl, 31 people died immediately from the explosion and acute radiation poisoning. But the explosion created a cloud of radioactive particles that spread eastward across Europe reaching as far as Sweden and the U.K. Since that time, it is estimated an additional 93,000 people have died from cancer and other illnesses due to the residual effects of the radioactive explosion at Chernobyl. Radiation poisoning is dangerous because it’s invisible and works silently, but it’s still deadly. Radioactive relationships can be harmful as well. But there’s another relationship in this passage:

2. A DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIP: LOVED BY OUR FATHER

This passage also tells us about another relationship—not a dangerous one, but a dynamic relationship. It’s the relationship we can enjoy with our loving Heavenly Father. In verse 18 God says, “I will be a Father to you.” Just because something is radioactive doesn’t mean it’s harmful. Harnessed nuclear energy has amazing power. For instance, old fashioned submarines powered by diesel and batteries had to surface regularly to refuel, recharge the batteries, and resupply the oxygen. Today, a nuclear powered submarine can stay submerged for months, because the nuclear reactor is producing an almost unlimited supply of power for propulsion and life support systems. A dynamo is a constant source of power, so our dynamic relationship with God is more powerful than any other force in the universe, including nuclear power!

Look again at 7:1, “Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”

What promises? As we read through the verses in chapter six warning us about toxic relationships, there were three great promises of God embedded in those verses. Whenever God gives a prohibition, He always gives a corresponding promise.

You’ll never appreciate a dynamic relationship with God until you understand the level of intimacy God wants to have with you. When Jesus taught about our relationship with God, instead of the formal word for father (*pater*), He chose to use the Aramaic word, *Abba*. It’s like our word “daddy” or “papa.” If you want to learn more about the depth of this relationship, read *Abba’s Child* by Brennan Manning, or *The Shack*, by William Young, and instead of calling God “Heavenly Father” you’ll start calling Him “Papa.” Here are the three promises:

(1) Our Father promises His indwelling presence

In verse 16 we read, “we are the temple of the Living God.” One of the greatest errors people hold today is by thinking a building is God’s temple. It’s an easy mistake to make, because in the Old Testament, the Temple was a structure. First it was a tabernacle (a tent), and later it was a building on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem, that’s where God’s Shekinah glory dwelt. But since the cross, God has a new temple, and it isn’t a building—it’s people. In the Old Testament, God had a Temple for His people, now God has a people for His temple.

God dwells in His people both individually and collectively. This passage speaks of God dwelling in His church, the plural pronoun is used. But in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, we learn that God dwells within every believer individually. “Do you not know that your body [singular] is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you...Therefore honor God with your body.”

In 1966, the “God-is-dead movement” reached its pinnacle. The cover of *Time Magazine* on April 8, 1966 asked, “Is God Dead?” The God-is-dead movement was originated by Frederick Nietzsche. In 1882, as scientific knowledge was blooming, Nietzsche wrote in a book he entitled (no kidding) *The Gay Science*, “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murder of all murderers?” French existentialist Albert Camus picked up the torch in the 20th Century, and today Richard Dawkins with his book, *The God Delusion* is the current No-God-Guru.

I have to smile because we know God isn’t dead, these men just lost His address! While they were looking for God somewhere out there, God is alive and well and living in His people. That’s the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages that Paul almost giggled about as he finally got to share it in Colossians 1:27, “Christ IN YOU, the hope of glory.” What a promise!

(2) Our Father promises His intimate fellowship

God also said in verse 16, “I will live [walk] with them.” Not only does God live *in* us, He promises He will live *with* us. The word literally means to walk with us. In the Bible, walking with someone was a sign of fellowship. Amos 3:3 asks, “Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?”

Humanity's relationship with God was broken in the Garden of Eden. The title of John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, says it all. When Adam and Eve sinned, they lost paradise, and since that time, we have all suffered from the reality of sin in this world. But salvation is basically Paradise Restored. Before the fall, the Bible says God walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening in Eden. That intimate fellowship was broken by sin. At the cross, Jesus died to fix everything that was broken by the Fall. Today, you and I can enjoy the same kind of intimate fellowship with God Adam and Eve had. As the lovely song written by Charles Austin says, "I come to the garden alone; while the dew is still on the roses; and the voice I hear falling on my ear; the Son of God discloses. And He walks with me; and He talks with me; And He tells me I am His own; and the joy we share as we tarry there; none other has ever known." It's more than a song, it is a dynamic reality for us right now!

(3) Our Father promises His infinite care

In verse 18 we read, "they will be my sons and daughters." Have you ever gone through so much suffering and pain that you wondered, "Does anyone even know the pain I feel? Does anybody even care?" I want to assure you that your Heavenly Dad knows what you're going through, and more than that, He cares. That's why the Bible says, "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7)

In Matthew 10:30 Jesus said our Heavenly Papa cares so much for each of us "that even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." I heard about a pastor who was trying to teach a children's sermon on this and he interviewed a little boy in front of the church. He said, "Tommy, who taught you to count?" Tommy said, "My daddy taught me to count." The pastor said, "What number comes after eight?" Tommy said, "Nine." "And what number comes after nine?" Tommy said, "Ten." "What number comes after ten?" Tommy was getting a little impatient and said, "Come on, pastor, you know what comes after ten ... a jack." We learn a lot of things from our dads, and one thing we learn about our Heavenly Dad is that He has numbered all the hairs on our head. Now, I care for my daughters and granddaughters a great deal, but I must confess I've never cared enough to number each hair on their head! Isn't it amazing to realize the Creator of the universe cares so much for you that He counts your hairs? When I was taking my shower this morning, my Heavenly Father was thinking, "there goes #4,567 down the drain, there goes #198 down the drain..."

CONCLUSION

My shoes are starting to feel pretty good actually, I'm gradually getting used to it. And I suspect that some of you aren't as shocked as you were at the beginning of the message. That's one of the problems with mismatched relationships. Over time you become accustomed to it and don't see anything wrong with it.

These three great promises of God should motivate us to want to avoid the dangerous radioactive relationships that are possible. Now, you could approach this by emphasizing the negative: I will keep away from the wrong kind of people. But a much better approach would be to focus on the positive: I will desire to have a dynamic relationship with my Father. As you desire to love God more and more, you'll find the desire for the wrong kinds of relationships will naturally fall

away.

Think of it this way. It’s easy to give a dog a bone, but it’s almost impossible to take a bone away from a dog. Even our little Schnauzer, Betsy, the world’s friendliest dog, will growl at me if I try to take a bone away from her. But there’s an easy way to take a bone away from a dog. All you have to do is offer a juicy steak to them. When you do that, the dog will evaluate and choose. In every case, they’ll give up the bone and take the steak. The same is true of our relationships. If you’re single and dating someone who is an unbeliever, you might think it’s pretty good—but it’s a bone, and God has a steak for you, a relationship with Him. If you’re thinking about entering in to a business partnership with an unbeliever, it may look like a tasty bone, but your Heavenly Dad has a steak for you, a dynamic relationship with Him. We all desire someone’s presence, intimacy, and someone to care for us, but if we settle for having those needs met by someone other than God, we’re settling for the bone when God has something so much better for us!

There is another yoke available to you. Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:29). It’s impossible to wear two yokes at one time, so if you are yoked together with Jesus, it’s impossible to be yoked together with an unbeliever.

I’ve been talking to believers today, because this text is directed toward Christians. However there are some of you who may feel a little out of place because you haven’t yet become a part of God’s family. If you desire, you can enjoy the presence, the intimate fellowship, the loving care of a Heavenly Father who wants to relate to you as a perfect Dad. We were all separated from God by our sin, and that chasm between our sinfulness and God’s holiness is too wide for any of us to jump over. But God spanned that chasm with a bridge shaped like a cross. When a person is hanging onto some issue in the past we say that they need to “get over it.” I recently heard someone say, “Why don’t you just build a bridge and get over it?” I thought that was pretty clever, and I thought, “Hmm. That’s exactly what God has done for us. He has already built the bridge and all we need to do is just get over it.” So I want to say to you today, God has already built the bridge, why don’t you just get over it?

Meanwhile, I’m going to put on some shoes that match.

OUTLINE

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(1) DOESN'T mean: Separating yourself physically from the world

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Jesus prayed: “As You have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” *John 17:18*

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners.’” *Luke 7:34*

(3) DOES mean: Avoiding partnerships with unbelievers

“Don’t become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That’s not partnership, that’s war. Is light best friends with darkness? Does Christ go strolling with the Devil? Do trust and mistrust hold hands?” *2 Corinthians 6:14 The Message*

2. A DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIP: LOVED BY OUR FATHER

“I will be a Father to you.”

Our Father (Abba, Papa, Daddy) promises His:

(1) Indwelling presence

“we are the temple of the Living God.”

(2) Intimate fellowship

“I will live [walk] with them.”

(3) Infinite care

“they will be my sons and daughters.”



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes