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God's Word to a Hesitating Church

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. (7:1)

*“Drawing Near To God Requires
Withdrawing from Evil”*

November 16, 2014

Sermon Text: 2 Cor 6

Scripture Reading:

Introduction-

A Warning and An Appeal (6:1-13)

2 Corinthians 6:1-13 Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. (2) For he says, "In a

favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

(3) We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, (4) but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, (5) beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; (6) by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; (7) by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; (8) through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; (9) as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; (10) as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet

making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. (11) We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. (12) You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. (13) In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

These verses are a kind of “let me sum up what I have been saying to you to this point” statement, opening with the punch line rather than ending with it –

we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

Here are these Corinthians. God in Christ had been very gracious to them in sending them Paul and through him preaching the gospel to them. They had experienced the ministry of the Holy Spirit showing them Christ and the truth of His Word. They had actually seen the visible signs of a true apostle, validating Paul as God’s messenger –

2 Corinthians 12:12 The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.

Yet they were faltering. They were listening to these newcomers among them who were alienating them against

Paul and really against Christ. This is every real pastor’s agony – seeing the flock drawn away by one of these hidden reefs who creep in among the church. So Paul is really pouring his heart out to these people, and this chapter opens with a very powerful and sobering warning from him to them (and to us)-

“...do not receive the grace of God in vain.”

In connection with that warning, Paul quotes as his authority, the Word of God from Isaiah –

2 Corinthians 6:2 For he says, "**In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.**" Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

How would they experience God’s grace and it all be in vain (for nothing)? Well, we will see as we move on through this chapter, two causes –

- Vs 11 – “you are restricted in your own affections...widen your hearts also.” That is to say, they were being aloof from Paul. Why? Because...
- Vs 14 – “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.” As long as they listened to and hung

with these false teachers, they would continue to be alienated from Paul, from the gospel, and would be in danger of ultimately receiving the grace of God *in vain*.

So what about this warning Paul gives them – “*we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain*”? Perhaps the Isaiah quote context will help us sort it out –

Isaiah 49:7-10 Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers: "Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." (8) **Thus says the LORD: "In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, (9) saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.' They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; (10) they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has**

pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.

Do you see what Paul is doing? He has just told them they are new creations in Christ (5:17). That the new heavens and earth are coming and they already have one foot in! Notice that the Isaiah passage is filled with New Heavens and New Earth imagery/descriptions:

- Kings shall bow down to the Lord
- The new covenant is everlasting
- The promised land (Eden) will be restored
- There shall be no more oppression (prisoners) and no more hunger or thirst
- Notice carefully the phrase “the day of salvation.” It really is more than merely ‘right now the Lord is calling upon you to be saved.’ No, it is a phrase that is equivalent to “the latter days.” It is a New Creation phrase that tells us the kingdom of God, the New Creation has already NOW come into being. Inaugurated, but not fully consummated.

So Paul is reminding the Corinthians of these New Creation promises for all who are in Christ and he is urging them, “Come on, come on! Don’t miss out on this! What a tragedy if you hear the gospel and taste God’s grace in

shining the light of Christ on you, and you turn away from Him and fall short.” G.K. Beale describes another way that a real Christian might receive God’s grace in vain –

“On the basis of both 1 & 2 Corinthians, we can say that Paul already regarded the Corinthians as ‘saints; that is, they were already reconciled with God. They responded with conversion to Paul’s initial proclamation of the gospel at Corinth. Yet many areas of their lives were not in agreement with God’s will; therefore Paul had to remind them to live in accordance with God’s grace shown to them. Telling them not to accept God’s grace ‘in vain’ may have been another way of calling them to a way of life that accords with the will of God as their thankfulness for God’s grace... Paul is probably urging the Corinthians to rededicate their lives to the Christian ideal.” [Commentary on the NT Use of the OT, Beale & Carson].

In addition, as Paul points to his own suffering for Christ in vss 3-10, we are also reminded that Isaiah 49 is in a section of Isaiah that speak about the sufferings of the Servant of the Lord (Christ). Isaiah 49 then validates Paul’s ministry as the appointed apostle of Christ. Remember, the Corinthians were falling for a worldly

estimation of Paul’s sufferings and were rejecting him as a result. Power and might, that’s what should be characteristic of an apostle – that was their thinking you see. And it was dead wrong. Listen to the NT Commentary again –

“In the larger context of the defense of Paul’s ministry this includes the expectation that the Corinthians accept Paul as Christ’s ambassador in the work of ‘reconciliation’; that is, they should accept Paul’s apostolic ministry....They should urgently show their gratitude for God’s salvation by leading a way of life in accordance with what is expected from the saints of God and also by receiving the apostle as the servant of the Servant, Jesus the Messiah. In that Paul was continuing the mission of Jesus, the Servant, he could easily apply this Servant prophecy to himself.”

Now, notice Paul’s “commendation” of his ministry. That is, his proof that it is of Christ. Listen to him again-

2 Corinthians 6:3-10 We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, (4) but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, (5) beatings, imprisonments, riots,

labors, sleepless nights, hunger; (6) by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; (7) by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; (8) through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; (9) as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; (10) as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

Nothing in his ministry can be accurately blamed for the Corinthians' present "distance" from Paul and the gospel. The cause was to be found in them. And so he says with all confidence-

2 Corinthians 6:11-13 We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. (12) You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. (13) In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

To Draw Near to God We Must be Separate From Unbelievers

Now what Paul is about to say next (vss 6:14-7:1) is *clearly still another*

and even primary reason that the Corinthians are standing off from him and hanging with false teachers. We know this to be the case because Paul continues with the very same theme in 7:2 –

2 Corinthians 7:2 Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one.

See it? This whole section here from 6:14 – 7:1 is Paul identifying a fundamental reason for their problem of being closed toward Paul and thus toward Christ. In some way, they were hanging with unbelievers. Listen to it –

2 Corinthians 6:14-18 Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? (15) What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? (16) What agreement has the temple of God with idols? 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.

(17) Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, (18) and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."

2 Corinthians 7:1 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.

NOTE: Many scholars and commentators (as Paul Barnett notes) maintain that this section is not Pauline. Paul didn't write it in other words. Someone inserted it into the epistle later, they insist. Why? Because it seems so disjoint and out of place at first glance.

Now, as we initially look at these verses, it is common for us to assume very quickly that obviously Paul is addressing a situation in which some of the Corinthian believers were still participating in idol temple worship and meals. This of course had been a problem at Corinth, as we know from Paul's first letter –

1 Corinthians 8:1 Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This

"knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up.

1 Corinthians 10:14-22 Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. (15) I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. (16) The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? (17) Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (18) Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? (19) What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? (20) No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. (21) You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. (22) Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

But is this the scenario Paul is addressing here in 2 Cor 6? Who are the people he is calling them to separate from?

Let me suggest to you that he does not have idol temple worshippers

primarily in mind here in 2 Corinthians. While idols are mentioned some 7 times in 1 Corinthians, the only mention in 2 Cor is here in verse 16. Does it not seem strange that Paul would, right in the middle of his argument about the true ministry of Christ vs that of imposters, launch into 5 verses about idols and idol temples, then return to his main point, as is clear in 7:2? It is my opinion that Paul is directly applying vss 14-18 to these false teachers who were leading the Corinthians astray. And if that be so, notice how serious Paul sees their evil. If that is the case, then Paul is calling these false teachers:

- unbelievers,
- lawless,
- darkness,
- Belial (Satan),
- Idol worshipers
- Unclean

If you scan 2 Corinthians, you will find Paul consistently addressing the problem of these infiltrators-

2 Corinthians 2:17 For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:2 But we have renounced disgraceful,

underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

2 Corinthians 5:12 We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.

2 Corinthians 10:2 I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh.

2 Corinthians 10:10 For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account."

2 Corinthians 11:4 For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

2 Corinthians 11:12-15 And what I do I will continue to do, in order to

undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. (13) For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. (14) And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. (15) So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

2 Corinthians 11:20 For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.

2 Corinthians 13:1-2 This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. (2) I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them--

And so it only seems reasonable to me that in 6:14-18, it is these people who have crept in that Paul is calling the Corinthians to stop being unequally yoked to.

Why am I spending so much time on this point? Because –

“It is rather easy for us to conclude that we have separated from idolatry and participation in the worship of idols in an idol temple. We don’t marry unbelievers. We try to avoid the erroneous teachings of false religions. All is well. Right?”

But not so fast. The people Paul is calling the Corinthians to separate from are not only the pagan idolaters. They are also, and perhaps even especially here in 2 Corinthians, counterfeit *Christians* who have infiltrated the church. They are people who put themselves across as sons of righteousness. As angelic messengers of light. Simon Kistemaker notes -

“Believers who have been justified by God must be quick to discern deception that they encounter either in word or in deed. They must refuse to be partners with those who practice deceit. Theirs is the task to expose deception as works of the evil one.”

In this light, consider again how Paul characterizes these infiltrators:

- unbelievers,
- lawless,
- darkness,
- Belial (Satan),

- Idol worshipers
- Unclean

Sound too harsh? Well, remember that key verse we emphasized-

2 Corinthians 5:16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.

Here is the real source of danger to us. Not so much the Buddhist temple down the street, but the agent of the enemy parading as a Christian. Let's use another biblical example-

2 Timothy 4:14-15 Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. (15) Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.

Now, I don't know that Alexander made any claim to be a Christian. But what I wanted to emphasize to you is that he was Alexander, the coppersmith. You know, the guy who has the copper shop down on the corner. The guy you have known in your small town perhaps your whole life. Yeah, that one – the one who seems like such a nice fellow. *Beware of him.* This, you see is regarding Alexander according to the Spirit.

Looking beyond what Alexander is merely according to the flesh.

I will Dwell Among Them

Once we see these kind for who and what they really are, then we need to separate from them and certainly not permit them to continue to be present *in the temple of God.* For WE are the temple of the living God! Think of it. Would you, if you had been a godly priest back in the time of the OT tabernacle, have allowed uncleanness, an idolater, a lawless person, an unbeliever to enter the tabernacle or the temple courts? Of course not. Fundamentally, Scripture's emphasis is upon the deceit and danger of counterfeit Christians that we are to be on guard for –

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- (10) not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. (11) But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one. (12) For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not

those inside the church whom you are to judge? (13) God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

And again –

1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Paul is quoting from Leviticus 26 here (vss 16-18), applying that instruction given to the Israelites in the days of the tabernacle to the Corinthian church (and to us) today. WE are the temple of God. And what is the temple? The temple is the *dwelling place of God, the place where God dwells among His people*. This you will remember is one of the great themes of the Bible from Genesis to revelation. God walking in Eden with Adam and Eve, sin disrupting that fellowship, and God setting out down through the history of His redemption in Christ to set things right once more. The Temple. Closer and closer He draws near until –

Revelation 21:1-3 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. (2) And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a

bride adorned for her husband. (3) And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

Revelation 21:22-27 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. (23) And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. (24) By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, (25) and its gates will never be shut by day--and there will be no night there. (26) They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. (27) But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

It is our calling now to be what we are – the temple of God. The Holy Spirit is in us. God desires to make His dwelling among us and walk among us and be our God. And this is what He says to us –

"Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them...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... ”.

Conclusion

Let me close with a practical example and application of this. The threat to biblical religion has ALWAYS been false religion. Idolatry. You think back into the OT era and how the Israelites were continually tempted to engage in idolatrous worship with the pagan nations around them. To intermarry with them and so on. Over and over the thing happened. False religion, you see. And the enemy is always at work, still today, attempting *to corrupt the true religion and people of God*. Study the history of the church and you will see this thing acting out continually. Think of the corruptions that Rome brought into the church. The threat, as at Corinth, is ALWAYS from those who claim to be religious and in fact most often from those who claim to be Christians.

In the little community where I live, there is a small store where the local guys hang out. If you go in there, you will almost certainly hear some pretty rank language. The owner is not a Christian, and does not claim to be. Most of the regulars are loggers or people who like hunting and fishing, long time locals and so on. Now while we are not to enter into “yoked-

together” type relationships with such people, let me recommend to you that the Bible does not tell us that these kind of people are the real danger to Christ’s people. (In fact, you will often find that in many ways we have more in common ideologically with them than with many “Christians”!!)

But very often Christians withdraw from these kinds of people, counting them as “unclean” yet all the while maintaining “yoked” relationships with the real threat – counterfeit religious types. False professors of Christ.

And isn’t that the case right on down through biblical history? Think of it –

- Tares among the wheat
- The Pharisees
- The idolatries of the world tempting us to participate in them
- “That woman” Jezebel who was being tolerated in the church at Thyatira
- The goats among the sheep
- And here in 2 Cor, Satan as an angel of light and his servants as “sons of righteousness”

And on and on we could go with examples.

Christian, there are and always will be people that you must come out from among and be separate from. When we do not obey this command from the

Lord, we necessarily distance ourselves from Him. Do not be yoked together with unbelievers, you are righteousness and they are lawlessness, you are light, they are darkness, you are the Temple of God, they are an idol temple.