

# HOLINESS MATTERS

## 2 CORINTHIANS 6:11-7:1

O Corinthians! We have spoken openly to you, our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your own affections. Now in return for the same (I speak as to children), you also be open.

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?

For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people."

Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you." "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

It's interesting how many phrases we use in our modern vernacular that are from a bygone era. Younger people lack the frame of reference to understand some of the colloquialisms that are still in use. *Here's a list...*

*"Upset the apple cart"* - what's an apple cart?

*"Turn the channel"* - how do you turn a channel?

*“Hang up the phone”* - when was the last time you literally hung up a phone? *“Dial a number”* - what’s a dial? *“You sound like a broken record”* - most millennials have no idea what a record is, let alone a broken one.

*“Roll up the window”* - how does that work?

*“Hold your horses”* - really?

*“See you on the flip side”* - what’s a flip side?

And there’re many more... *“he was put through the ringer...”* *“you’re running out of steam...”* *“I need your John Hancock...”* *“tape a show...”* Even *“clockwise...”* Today's digital clocks have made that term obsolete.

These phrases linger, but the concepts behind them, that were once part of our life, are no longer recognized.

And there is another word that tragically I’d put in this same category. It’s the term **“holiness.”** In the church the phrase, *“living a holy life,”* was once used often, but today few Christians even know what it means.

In 2006, pollster George Barna did a survey. He reported the results under the title, **“The Concept of Holiness Baffles Most Americans.”** One in five adults surveyed had no idea what the word **“holiness”** meant. The other 80% had a wide range of differing opinions.

The most startling finding was that only 35% of Americans believe **“God expects you to be holy.”**

Here’s a window into the current state of Christianity in America... two-thirds of church goers have *no taste for - no understanding of - no desire -* to be holy.

How many people do you know value their personal holiness as a top priority in their life? Sadly, even a lot of pastors these days shy away from talking about the topic! "Holiness" is becoming a forgotten word.

Whereas in my Bible, today's section - this morning's text - is titled, "Be Holy." *God must still value holiness!*

This is Paul's subject in the second half of Chapter 6 and the first verse of Chapter 7. He encourages the Corinthians, as well as you and me, to live a holy life.

Before we jump into our text. Let's begin by making sure we know what Paul means by the important phrase he employs in 7:1, "*perfecting holiness.*"

The Greek word translated "*holy*" is "hagios." It means "to treat as special to God, or to set aside for God's exclusive use." Often, we think of "*holiness*" as an intrinsic quality. What's "*holy*" is better or purer than what's not. But that isn't the right use of the word.

In the OT the bowls and utensils used in the Temple were considered "*holy*" - not because they were made from special metals, or because of a specific design.

Their construction and the materials that went into these cups, and bowls, and shovels were likely the same as other vessels, but what made them "*holy*" was their dedication to the Lord's service. It was their *consecration* not *composition* that made them "*holy.*"

Once there was a mom who thought her household rules would carry more weight if they were written like OT laws. She thought, surely her kids would obey biblical-sounding

commandments. Here were her rules:

"Of the beasts of the field, and of the fish of the sea, and of all foods that are acceptable in my sight you may eat, but not in the living room.

Of the hoofed animals, broiled or ground into burgers, you may eat, but not in the living room.

Of the cloven-hoofed animals, plain or with cheese, you may eat, but not in the living room.

Of the cereal grains, of the corn and of the wheat and of the oats, and of all the cereals that are of bright color you may eat, but not in the living room.

Of frozen dessert and of all frozen after-meal treats you may eat, but absolutely not in the living room.

Of the juices and other beverages, yes, even of those in sippy-cups, you may drink, but not in the living room. Neither may you carry such therein.

Indeed, when you reach the place where the living room carpet begins, of any food or beverage there you may not eat, neither may you drink. But if you are sick, and are lying down and watching something, then may you eat in the living room." Obviously, with only a few exceptions her living room was off limits to eaters.

I'm sure this mom's living room was constructed of the same materials as every other room in her house.

But apparently, she dedicated her living room as a special room for special functions; thus, what she allowed in other rooms didn't happen in the living room.

And this is how you should understand "*holiness.*"

Your life is God's living room - you're the place where He continues His work, and lives out His life. And He's very picky about what happens in *His living room!*

As a Christian you're special to God - not because you're intrinsically better or different than your peers, but because you're God's child - your life, and all that you are, is set aside for His exclusive purposes.

When you embraced Jesus as Lord, you in essence reserved your life for Him - you're dedicated to Him.

Thus, anything that defaces the beauty and purity of a Christian's life - that diminishes God's glory in that person - or tarnishes their witness - becomes off-limits!

And here's why this subject comes up at this point in Paul's letter. He's been talking about our relationship with the world. *Let's not close ourselves off from the folks who need us most. Let's get out of our Christian bubble and interact with the people who need Jesus.*

A believer can get trapped in a Christian subculture that limits opportunities to interact with lost people. He or she ends up only having meaningful spiritual conversations with other Christians who agree with us.

But in Chapter 5 Paul tells us God has given us *“the ministry of reconciliation.”* We're to be actively involved in reaching non-Christians with the Gospel.

He calls us *“ambassadors for Christ.”* We're citizens of heaven living in a foreign land. Our job is to speak God's Word to the people Jesus died to save in a way they can understand. This is our mission on this Earth.

But here's the problem, we can go to the other extreme. We can get too immersed in the culture.

Remember, a Christian is like an interpreter. We need to be articulate in both languages - in the language of heaven, and in the language of earth.

*Certainly, I can be fluent in heaven's language, but out of touch with the people around me...* **But there's another danger.** I can become so fluent and saturated with the language of Earth - so familiar with pagan culture - that I fail to grasp what matters to heaven.

We get too worldly in our thinking and perspective.

When George Shultz served as Secretary of State he kept a large globe in his office. When he met with a US ambassador he'd always give them a quiz. He'd tell them to go over to the globe, and point to *their* country.

Invariably, they would pick the nation to which they'd been sent. And Shultz would give them a lesson in diplomacy... He'd correct them by pointing to America.

Shultz wanted his foreign ambassadors to never forget the land where they lived was not their home. An ambassador's home is the land he represents.

The same is true for *"an ambassador for Christ."* As citizens of God's kingdom we need to represent it well!

*Here's what can happen...* in an effort to build bridges with lost people we become familiar with their music, and movies, and fashion, and styles, but **culture isn't just a reflection of people's values, it also shapes our values.**



And this was especially dangerous in decadent Corinth. You couldn't dip your toe too far into Corinthian culture without contracting a virus. Life in Corinth was twisted. Greed was glorified and sex was worshipped.

And Paul is warning the Corinthian believers that they can go too far. They need to remain holy and separated unto God - keep their hearts and minds out of the gutter.

As a grandpa I recognize when my granddaughter, Hannah, has soiled her diaper. I'm not aloof, and uncaring, and stand-offish to my baby girl's situation. *I'll take a whiff. I can spot the evidence around the edges.*

But that doesn't mean I need to change her diaper.

*That's the parent's job!* I can be aware and informed without getting personally involved in her poop.

And this is my attitude toward a lost world. I don't need to open up a diaper to understand the problem. Besides, it's Jesus that cleans people up, not me. I don't have to get in the poop with people to bring them to Jesus.

It was after Paul left Corinth that problems developed in their church. In short, rather than *the Church influencing Corinth - Corinth influenced the Church.*

Paul was in Ephesus when he learned of the trouble. From there he penned this letter of correction.

Remember the old analogy, "Boats are made to be in the water, but you don't want water in the boat."

High seas and storms are no threat to a well-built boat. Ships are fabricated to stay afloat in rough water. The danger

though is if the water ever gets into the boat... *And this is a danger in the life of a Christian.*

Jesus builds us up to survive, even thrive, on the storm-tossed sea of this world. He makes us a witness!

But if the values of this world seep into a Christian's heart, they'll sink us. This was what was happening in Corinth. The Corinthian believers had gotten bogged-down, water-logged - some were outright drowning.

This is why Paul appeals to them so forcefully in verse 11, "O Corinthians! We have spoken openly to you, our heart is wide open." In other words, "We've been spilling our guts - pouring out our hearts to you..."

"You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your own affections." Paul says "stop blaming me for your problems." Why is it when Christians stop growing, or lack motivation, they blame the pastor.

"He's just not feeding us like he use too." Paul says, "No, you are the cause of your own problems."

One night I was listening to the Dr. Laura call-in counseling show on the radio. One caller was talking about the problems her parents were *having*...

That's when Dr. Laura jumped in and corrected the lady. She said, "No, the problems they are *creating*."

She explained that when a tornado demolishes your house - you **have** a problem. But when you act selfishly, and make bad choices you **create** a problem!

There's a difference between *having* and *creating* difficulties. And Paul is saying to the Corinthians, they are the



creators of their troubles, not just the victims.

In verse 13 he adds, "Now in return for the same (I speak as to children), you also be open." Paul feels like he's treating the Corinthians like a bunch of children.

He says, "Okay, I've been honest with you - now, you be honest with me!" For the last several chapters Paul has laid bare his resume and motives for ministry.

Earlier in Chapter 6 Paul pointed to the pressures, the priorities, and the paradoxes of his ministry as evidence of its genuineness. You don't endure all that Paul put up with if you're a phony or a hypocrite.

Paul had been an open book to the Corinthians. Now it was time for *them* to practice some self-examination.

In verse 14, he lays out a vital aspect of holiness, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers."

The imagery is that of a plow pulled by two oxen.

The necks of the animals are in a wooden harness, or yoke. The yoke is constructed to force the oxen to work together. It causes pain if one of the oxen doesn't cooperate with the other. The yoke chokes the ox who pulls ahead, and pinches the ox that lags behind.

The yoke was designed to encourage teamwork.

Thus, it's easier on the animals to yoke together two of the same breed. Mix a donkey or horse with an ox, and you insure friction and frustration on both partners.

Different species have diverse natures that pull apart and fight against each other. And this is the case with a believer

and an unbeliever. There's going to be friction.

*“But we're soulmates. Our hearts are yoked together. It doesn't really matter to me what he believes about God, we have a special connection. We're in love.”*

Well, I'm here to tell you, it will matter... *big time!*

Whether you see it now or not - what a person believes about God will influence the choices they make. It has a profound effect on the way they live their life and how they treat other people. In choosing a mate, *their faith* is not where you want to compromise.

*If she's a little homely-looking, that's okay - if he doesn't have the money you were hoping for, you can adjust. Go for it. Love will overshadow the deficiencies.*

But if he or she isn't committed to Jesus date that person like the plague. *Run away as fast as you can.*

**“Do not be unequally yoked... with unbelievers.”**

Realize a Christian and a non-Christian are separate species - they're different breeds with diverse natures.

A believer is born of God - alive to the things of the Spirit. Whereas an unbeliever might be a nice person, but they're dead in sin, and unaware of God's Spirit.

Put these two breeds in the same yoke - *in a marriage, or business, or roommate situation, or serious dating relationship* - and it'll cause big league, long-term frustration. At first, the parties might let stuff slide, but over time the relationship will inevitably drift in different directions. You'll pinch or choke each other. The yoke produces pain. **An unequal yoke is no joke.**

Here's the rule, "Be a friend to sinners, but fellowship only with saints." 1 Corinthians 15:33 warns, "Evil company corrupts good habits." Hang out with bad influences, and you'll eventually get *hung out* to dry.

To help the Corinthian believers think this through, in verses 14-16 Paul asks five rhetorical questions...

"For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial?" Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?" "And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?"

In other words, some things just don't mix... *oil and water, honey and vinegar, drinking and driving, hot days and chocolate bars, water and electricity, Bulldogs and Gators, sunshine and homework...*

And especially **believers** and **unbelievers!**

Look at each of these questions carefully...

"For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness?" A righteous person stands before God with their back straight and their head held high.

They're unashamed. Not because they haven't sinned, but all their sin is under the blood of Jesus.

Whereas, a lawless man lives his life ducking and diving, and trying to avoid God at all costs. He knows in the light of God both his outright rebellion and secret sins will be exposed. Deep down inside he's ashamed.

The righteous and lawless have two diametrically opposed

approaches to God. They don't go together.

**“And what communion has light with darkness?”**

How do you get rid of the darkness? Let in the light.

Darkness and light can't co-exist. They cancel each other out - the same with a believer and an unbeliever.

**“And what accord has Christ with Belial?”** *“Belial”* means **“worthless.”** It was an ancient epithet for Satan.

If your heart was made to be inhabited, and it was. Then the most appalling mistake you can make is to book God and Satan in the same room at the same time - overlap their reservation. *Are you nuts?*

There's no way God and Satan are ever going to hang out with each other. Satan will fear God, and God won't appreciate the devil's company. That's why a union between a believer and unbeliever is doomed.

**“Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?”**

As the old saying goes, **“they're marching to a different drummer.”** And this is the point Paul is making in our text. We need to have contact with unbelievers, but **contact is one thing, contract is very different.**

It's okay to shake hands and even rub shoulders with the world. As long as I'm *the influencer*, I can interact, but when I become *the influenced*, I need the freedom to leave. If I get too intertwined or interconnected to exit when I need to, I end up vexed and defeated.

Paul asks one more question in verse 16, **“And what**

agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God.” As a believer, God the Holy Spirit lives in you. You are the temple of the Lord! Now why would God ever room with idols?

It’s an insult. Such an arrangement diminishes His glory. It lowers God to the level of a stone or a stick.

As the Temple of God’s Spirit do you want to be dragged down and share the same plight as an idol.

And this is what happens whenever you so yoke yourself with the world that *your outcome* and *their outcome* are inseparably linked. If God is bound to judge the world, and you’re linked to it, you’re actually setting yourself up to suffer some collateral damage!

If you’re rolling with the party crowd - even if you haven’t had a drink - if they do something stupid you’re vulnerable to the consequences of their actions.

The cops are probably hauling everybody to jail.

Say you buy into a business with an unbeliever. *And I get it, God loves that unbeliever*, but what if He loves him or her so much that He tries to get their attention by setting in motion some crippling financial hardships.

God warned you to stay out of His way... *don’t yoke yourself to an unbeliever...* but you did it anyway.

Now the only person you have to blame is yourself.

A holy life will avoid these kinds of entanglements.

For “**As God has said** (verse 16 quotes Ezekiel 37): **“I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and**

**they shall be My people.”** If God is our God - if He dwells in us and walks with us - then linking our lives to an unbeliever is the ultimate incompatibility.

If I'm walking with God I'll reach out to an unbeliever, and be a witness, and serve that person - *that's great!*

But if my relationship with an unbeliever will be a permanent wedge between me and God; *then watch out!* Holiness clarifies my allegiances. It streamlines my priorities. It reserves my life and heart for God alone.

Verse 17 quotes Isaiah 52, **"Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord.**

It's sad, but somewhere along the line the Church got the notion that *to win the world we had to be like the world.* To be relevant we needed to use the same vulgar language, watch the same filthy movies, etc.

That's ridiculous. Obviously, that's not what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 9 when said he would **"become all things to all men that he might win some."** Relating to people has limits. Finding common ground doesn't mean adopting their corrupt habits and thinking.

Here, in the same context of reconciling sinners, and representing Jesus, Paul is clear that's not the tact to take. Sure to be a good interpreter we need to know the language of the world, and show our empathy, but if we act like the world we've got nothing to give them.

It's only when we're different spiritually, and morally, and joyfully - that the world will want what we've got.

It's by coming out of the world that we show lost men *the*



*way out.* That there is a difference. There is a better way to live. It's our holiness that attracts people.

This is why Paul continues in verse 17, **“Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.”** *What makes us think anybody would want to shake a dirty hand?*

The person you're witnessing to may be desperately reaching out for help, but how long are they going to hold a hand no cleaner than their own... A holy God certainly doesn't want to *hold hands with filthy hands.*

Once a mom tried to teach a lesson to her sons. She was in the garden and pointed to her white garden gloves, **“Boys, notice when I stick my gloves in the dirt, the gloves become dirty, the dirt doesn't get glovey.”**

We can never underestimate the lure of our flesh. I don't care what spiritual heights you're able to reach. Like deer's feet on high places - you can run with God and experience deep intimacy with His Spirit.

But we still have *clay feet.* We're made of flesh that gets tempted and grows weak. It's always easier for the gloves to get dirty than it is for the dirt to get glovey.

Recently, there was a passage that caught my attention as we were studying through Ezekiel (44:21). It reads, **“No priest shall drink wine when he enters the inner court.”** Ezekiel is describing the Millennial Temple - the worship that will occur after Jesus returns.

This is the time when Jesus reigns. When heaven comes to earth. When the Earth will become a utopia.

But it's fascinating to me, that even under the best case scenario - in an environment totally conducive to godliness - God still warns the priests not to drink alcohol when they enter the Temple to worship Him.

*Why is that?* It's because the priests are still *fleshly*, and as long as they live in *fleshly bodies* they're susceptible to *fleshly temptations* - like getting drunk.

If the priest dulls his spiritual sensitivity, and gets reckless with holy things, it will ruin his worship of God.

Even in a perfect world where God's servants are heading off to worship *no less*, they still have to separate themselves from temptations, and dangers, and potential liabilities. *Holiness is still the issue!*

Today, I hear of Christians who get together to drink a few brewskis and study the Bible, and I'm appalled.

Sure, a Christian has the liberty to drink a beer or a glass of wine, but he shouldn't do so without recognizing the inherent dangers that come with it, and safeguarding the holy things from potential misuse.

Drinking alcohol and pursuing God are incompatible. If ministering before the Lord in His Temple doesn't deserve our purest and most guarded, *what does?*

The problem in a nutshell is a lack of holiness. We should reserve ourselves - *at our best* - for God's will.

In verse 17 God says invitingly, "*I will receive you...*" but what's first, "*do not touch what is unclean.*"

God wants us to know Him, but we need to have the

decency not to enter His presence, nonchalant - with dirt on our hands or a stench on our breath. *Be holy!*

I think the goal of a Christian in his or her interactions with the world is a lot like a fisherman.

I haven't done a lot of fishing in my life, but the times I've gone the idea has been to catch some fish without getting wet - *or falling out of the boat into the lake.*

That's what Paul is teaching us here. Jesus called His disciples to be "fishers of men." That means we need to know the lake. Where the good beds are located. What bait to use. When the fish like to feed...

But you can know all that, even catch a lot of fish, and still stay dry. You don't have to jump in the pond to pull out a fish. In fact, a fisherman who goes swimming, probably won't be very successful. Chances are you'll catch more fish if you stay in the boat.

And the same is true in our attempts to win people to Jesus. We don't need to get wet with the world to catch fish for Jesus. An ambassador for Christ stays loyal to God's kingdom. He doesn't betray his homeland.

Mike Howerton tells the story of a neighborhood football game he played in as a child. For a while he was having the time of his life. After a heavy downpour Mike and his buddies found some standing water in a field. They played mud football. Every tackle sent you sliding ten yards. The ball was like a greased pig. There were fumbles and laughter. Everyone had fun.

That is, until Mike tackled a buddy. After they'd slid twenty yards together Mike noticed something white on his friend's shoulder. He took a closer look...

*It was a clump of wet toilet paper.* Suddenly, all the boys realized they were playing in a sewer back-up. In heavy rains the sewage water clogged up. Mike and his friends realized they were playing in poopy water.

You've never seen a group of boys run home so fast.

And I wonder when is it going to dawn on some Christians that the fun they're having - the supposed liberties they're enjoying - is actually spiritual sewage.

Paul says in verse 18, "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters," says the LORD Almighty." As Christians we are literally God's kids!

And our goal as God's kid is *to live like it*, not push the limits of our Father's patience with our compromise.

If you want to see how far you can indulge in the world and still belong to God - that's the wrong attitude. Our priority should be to never dishonor our Father!

And again, this is why you shouldn't marry an unbeliever. When you marry you join another family.

And sparks fly when you marry into the wrong family.

I've heard it said, "If a child of God marries a child of the devil, then the child of God is sure to have some trouble with his father-in-law." You can count on it!

I hate to harp on it, but I've seen the pain. I could fill a forty

gallon drum with the tears I've had shed in my office over the misery of unequally yoked marriages.

Nothing is as agonizing, and complex, and taxing on a Christian as being married to someone who doesn't share their most basic, heartfelt allegiance to Jesus.

There's actually a road sign at the beginning of the Alaskan Highway. It reads, "**Choose your rut carefully, you'll be in it for the next 200 miles.**" And if you're a Christian contemplating a partnership with a person who doesn't share your faith, that road sign is for you!

Give serious consideration to the person you marry.

And let me add one more thought. It's just my conviction, but no one can refute its truthfulness, "**You will never marry an unbeliever if you never date one.**"

There's one more verse included in our text this morning. It's actually the first verse of the next chapter.

Realize, the chapter and verse divisions in your Bible weren't in the original. They came later. They're man-made. They were added so we could find specific verses. *But sometimes their inventors got it wrong.*

Which in my opinion happened here. The first verse in Chapter 7 should actually be the last verse in Chapter 6. It wraps up the previous thought so well.

It reads, "**Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.**"

This is a loaded verse. The great promises of God Paul has

discussed are motivation for us to *“cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit.”*

Certainly, we’re cleansed spiritually by Jesus the moment we’re saved. But there’s also an ongoing cleansing. In Ephesians 5, Paul calls it, *“the washing of water by the Word”*. It’s a cleansing that rolls over a Christian’s thinking, and habits, and likes, and dislikes.

Paul even exhorts us to be *“perfecting holiness.”*

Now don’t mistake this phrase, *“perfecting holiness”* with *sinless perfection* - there’s no such thing. This side of heaven, none of us will ever be totally sinless. As long as we live in a fallen body, we’ll stumble at times.

The Greek word translated *“perfecting”* actually means *“to complete or finish.”* Paul is encouraging us to complete our holiness. To grow in holiness.

To separate unto God more and more areas of my life, until the whole enchilada belongs to the Savior!

Pastor Kent Hughes makes an probing observation, *“The great tragedy for so many people is that as they get older, they do not get any holier. Time has been the enemy. They left their moral apex in Junior High School. They were better boys than they are men.”*

Christians tend to get apathetic. The string on their bow loosens. They’re no longer a straight-shooter.

It’s been said, *“Most Christians are far too indiscriminate about the things they allow to influence their minds.”* We forget, it’s garbage in, garbage out. We need to guard where we allow our minds to graze.



If we're to be holy we've got to take out the trash.

Every Wednesday, our *Church Joe*, JP, comes by my office with a fresh garbage can liner. He always sticks his head in, and asks, "Pastor Sandy, got any trash?"

And this is what I need to be asking myself... **Got any trash?** *Have I been accumulating trash in my life?*

If we don't take out the trash regularly it piles up, it stinks, it offends God, and it sours the attitudes of the folks around us. Cleanse yourself of all filthiness of the flesh and spirit - *lust and lulls* - by taking out the trash.

Here's my question for you, "*got any trash?*"