

05/31/26 God's Call to Separation

2 Corinthians 6:11-18

Good Morning...

We are continuing our study in Second Corinthians this morning. The title of our message this morning is *God's Call to Separation*. Most people do not think of separation as a good word. In our day, separation sounds cold, judgmental, narrow, and even unloving. We are told that the highest good is inclusion, openness, and staying connected to everyone and everything. And yet, when Paul writes 2 Corinthians 6:11-18, he does something very different. He calls believers to open their hearts, but he also calls them to draw clear lines where God has drawn clear lines.

That matters, because the Christian life is not just about what we avoid. It is about who we belong to. Paul is not writing to people who need a little moral improvement. He is writing to people who belong to the living God, who are meant to be His temple, and who are called to live as His sons and daughters. That identity changes everything. It changes the way we think about friendship, influence, marriage, worship, loyalty, and even the direction of our hearts.

So before we read this passage too quickly, we need to ask whether we are willing to let God define our relationships, our allegiances, and our priorities. Because if we belong to Him, then our lives cannot be shaped by unbelief, compromise, or divided loyalties. God's call is not merely to be different for difference's sake. His call is to belong fully to Him.

Let's read 2 Corinthians 6:11-18 ...

There's a word in architecture called a threshold – the strip of wood or metal at the bottom of a doorway. Ancient homes used to put it there deliberately, because you couldn't bring two different worlds into one house without something separating them.

Many of us are living with a threshold. We've let the world walk straight into the house of our hearts – its values, its loyalties, its idols – and we wonder why we feel spiritually scattered. Paul had a word for that. He called it being “unequally yoked.” And today he's going to call us back to the threshold – back to the door of decision about who we belong to.

This passage is not simply about avoiding the wrong things. It is about belonging fully to the Lord and living in a way that fits that identity.

This brings us to the main point and outline of our passage. **In 2 Corinthians 6:11-18, Paul calls the Corinthians to open their hearts to truth and separate from unbelief, so that they may live as God's temple and enjoy fellowship as His sons and daughters.**

Paul calls the Corinthians to four clear responses.

I. Open your hearts to truth 11-13

II. Separate from unbelief 14-15

III. Live as God's temple 16

IV. Enjoy fellowship as His children 17-18

My prayer is that God would help us to live as His temple and enjoy fellowship as His sons and daughters. With that prayer in mind, let's look at our first point.

The first response to this passage...

I. Open your hearts to truth

Paul begins with affection in verse 11... *"Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide."* He is not cold, detached, or impersonal. He has spoken plainly because he loves them. Paul's openness is not harshness. It is honesty shaped by love. That kind of open honesty is exactly what we see in 2 Corinthians 4:2, where Paul says, *"but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."*

Now, before we go further, we need to understand something plain: ministry has a cost. Sometimes it's messy. Sometimes it requires sacrifice. When you open your heart to people – really open it – it doesn't always go smoothly. Dealing with people can be painful. You invest in them. You love them, you shepherd them, and sometimes they hurt you. Sometimes they misunderstand you. Sometimes they turn against you. That's part of the job. Paul knows this. His heart is enlarged toward the Corinthians, but look at what he's gone through with them—misunderstood, criticized, wounded. And yet he says, "I'm opening my heart wider." That's the cost of ministry. But it's also the point. You don't get to the transformed lives without the messy, costly, sacrificial work of loving real people.

Then Paul says something that is both tender and painful in verse 12... *"You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections."* In other words, the problem was not with Paul. He had not stopped loving them, and he had

not withheld the truth from them. The problem was in their own hearts. Their affections had grown narrow, and because of that, they were not responding to him as they should.

That is often how spiritual drift works. Hearts do not usually slam shut overnight. They tighten over time.

Think about what happens in the body when arteries harden. You don't wake up one morning and have a heart attack because your arteries hardened overnight. That's not how it works. Day after day, year after year, something small builds up on the inside of the artery. A little plaque here, a little buildup there. You can't see it. You don't feel it. The doctor can't even tell you've got a problem until it's too late. But slowly, steadily, the artery gets narrower. The blood flow gets restricted. The heart has to work harder just to get the oxygen it needs. And then one day, maybe while you're shoveling dirt or running after your kids or just walking to your car, something gives. The artery closes completely. And the heart stops.

Spiritual hardening is the same way. It's not usually one big sin that kills your walk with God. It's not a dramatic falling away. It's the small compromises that you make that nobody sees. Day after day, the buildup is small. You don't notice it. But your heart is getting narrower. Your love is getting cold. Your spiritual arteries are hardening. And one day you find yourself unable to love like you used to, unable to serve like you used to, unable to feel the things you used to feel. Not because you slammed your heart shut, but because it tightened over time.

A believer can become less open to correction, less responsive to Scripture, and more selective about what he will receive. Jerry Bridges captures that danger well when he says, "God's primary means of searching our hearts is through His Word." That is why spiritual growth and maturity depend on being willing to hear what God says before we decide what we think.

Think of a person whose hands have been clenched around something for a long time. At first the grip feels normal. But over time, the muscles tighten, the hand stiffens, and it becomes harder to let go. That is what happens spiritually when a heart resists truth. It grows less flexible, less teachable, and less willing to yield. What begins as resistance eventually becomes a habit. What begins as reluctance becomes dullness.

That is why spiritual dullness is so dangerous. It does not begin with open rebellion. More often it begins with small acts of resistance, little moments when we don't want to hear what God is saying. We become defensive when Scripture

confronts us, slow to repent when conviction comes, and reluctant to let God's Word correct our thinking. Before long, the heart that once welcomed truth begins to resist it, and the believer starts shrinking inward instead of opening outward before God.

Paul's response also shows us that real love does not stop speaking truth, and real love does not stop correcting. Hebrews 12:6 reminds us, "*For whom the Lord loves He disciplines.*" God's discipline is not a contradiction of His love. It is one of the clearest expressions. J.C. Ryle put it this way, "Nothing darkens the eyes of the mind so much, and deadens the conscience so surely, as an allowed sin." That is a sobering reminder that truth is not the enemy of love. It is one of the ways love protects us.

And notice that Paul's tone here is not angry detachment. He speaks as a father, not a rival. In verse 13 he says, "*Now in a like exchange-I speak as to children-open wide to us also.*" He is not demanding admiration. He is pleading for their hearts. He wants reciprocal affection, yes, but more than that, he wants restored fellowship grounded in truth.

That is the first call of this passage...open your heart to truth. Do not let your affections grow narrow. Do not become selective toward God's Word. Do not resist the correction you need simply because it is uncomfortable. Receive His truth with humility, because spiritual growth begins with a heart that is open to God.

If the first response to this passage is an open heart toward truth, the second is a clear separation from what opposes that truth.

II. Separate from unbelief

Paul moves to verse 14 to a strong warning, "*Do not be bound together with unbelievers...*" The idea is not casual association in everyday life, but a binding partnership that pulls in two different directions. He then asks a series of questions that make the point unmistakable: "*for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?*"

Paul's point is simple...There are some unions that make no spiritual sense because they join what God has fundamentally made different. The issue is not whether Christians should show kindness, maintain friendship, or evangelize unbelievers. Of course they should. The issue is whether believers should enter binding partnerships that compromise their loyalty to Christ.

A good illustration is a yoke in the field. Two animals under one yoke must pull together in the same direction, at the same pace, with the same strength. If they are mismatched, the work becomes strained and the path becomes crooked. That is what happens when a believer is yoked to unbelief in a way that shapes direction, values, or obedience. The partnership starts to distort the walk. What should have been a straight path becomes a crooked one.

Paul's warning in 2 Corinthians 6 is consistent with what Darin read from Ephesians 5 earlier, "*Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them.*" Separation is not withdrawal from people it is refusal to join ourselves to what is dark, unfruitful, and contrary to Christ.

Now, not every relationship is a forbidden relationship. Paul is not telling believers to avoid all contact with unbelievers, because if that were the case, we could never live out the Great Commission or display the love of Christ in the world. What he is forbidding is a binding union like marriage that requires shared direction, shared values, or shared spiritual purpose. Once a believer joins himself to that kind of arrangement, compromise is no longer hypothetical. It becomes built into the partnership itself.

That is why Paul presses the contrast so hard. Light and darkness do not blend into one another. Righteousness and lawlessness do not cooperate as equals. Christ and Belial do not share authority. Believers and unbelievers do not have the same ultimate allegiance. There is no spiritual middle ground here. Paul is not being dramatic. He is being clear.

So Paul is not calling for isolation from the world. He is calling for separation from anything that would bind the believer to unbelief in a way that weakens obedience to Christ. The Christian must be friendly without surrendering conviction, and compassionate without compromising loyalty. We are called to love unbelievers, and speak to unbelievers, but not bind ourselves to them in ways that blur allegiance to Christ.

That distinction matters in very practical ways. It speaks to marriage, business, ministry, and any relationship where two people are yoked together in a way that shapes the future. A believer cannot treat Christ as first in theory and then surrender practical direction to unbelief in the most important commitments of life. The issue is not whether the unbeliever is pleasant, gifted, or sincere. The issue is whether the arrangement honors Christ or places pressure on the believer to move in a direction that weakens obedience.

And that is also why this command is not merely negative. It is protective. God is not trying to rob His people of joy. He is guarding them from compromise. He knows what this kind of spiritual compromise will do to a believer's heart. He knows how slowly compromise dulls the conscience and weakens obedience. So his call to separation is not hostility. It is mercy.

Paul now goes deeper, because separation is not merely about what we avoid. It is about what we are.

III. Live as God's temple

In verse 16 Paul asks, "*Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols?*" That is a searching question, because idols are not only carved images or pagan shrines. An idol is anything that competes with God for our worship, our affection, or our obedience. And then Paul answers, "*For we are the temple of the living God.*" That is not just a theological statement. It is an identity statement. God's people are not an empty shell waiting to be filled by the world. They are His dwelling place.

Paul then supports that truth with the promise of God's presence, "*I will dwell in them and walk among them; And I will be their God, and they shall be My people.*" That language reaches back through the Old Testament, echoing God's covenant promises in passages like Leviticus 26:12 and Ezekiel 37:27, where God pledges to dwell among His people. The whole storyline of Scripture is moving toward this kind of covenant presence.

That means the Christian life is not merely about staying away from sin. It is about living in a way that honors the holy presence of God. If God truly dwells among His people, then our lives cannot be treated like common ground. We belong to Him. The church is not a religious club that occasionally hosts God. It is the dwelling place of the living God. And if that is true of the church, then it also has implications for the believer's individual life, because we belong to Him.

Here is an illustration. If you knew a special guest was coming to stay in your home, you would not leave the rooms dirty, cluttered, and neglected. You prepare the house because the presence of the guest changes how the house is treated. In a greater way, if we are God's temple, then His presence should shape what we welcome, what we tolerate, and what we pursue. The question is not merely whether something is technically permitted. The question is whether it fits the dwelling place of God.

This also means that holiness is not just something we bring to church on Sundays. It is something that should mark the whole of our lives. If God dwells among His people, then what happens in private matters. What we watch, what we pursue, what we tolerate, what we hide, and what we excuse are all brought into the light of His presence. The God who is with us is concerned with the sincerity of the heart before Him.

That is where the doctrine of holiness becomes deeply practical. Holiness is not just about public standards. It reaches into private thoughts, hidden desires, secret habits, and ordinary patterns of life. If God dwells among His people, then every area of life belongs under His gaze. That does not make holiness oppressive. It makes holiness personal. The God who is with us wants us to live like we are with Him.

So Paul's argument is not merely moral. It is covenantal. We live differently because God lives among His people. We are not our own. We are His temple, and that changes everything. The believer pursues holiness because he already is God's dwelling place by grace.

Once we remember whose temple we are, the final response makes perfect sense. We are to live not only as His dwelling place, but as His children.

IV. Enjoy fellowship as His children

Paul closes with another promise in verses 17 to 18, *"Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate, says the Lord. And do not touch what is unclean; And I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me, Says the Lord Almighty."* When Paul says, *"come out from their midst... and do not touch what is unclean,"* he is calling believers to turn from idolatry and every form of compromise that would defile their loyalty to Christ. Separation is not cold distance from God's people. It is the pathway into richer fellowship with God Himself.

The promise is astonishing. God does not say, *"If you separate, I will merely tolerate you."* He says, *"I will welcome you."* Then He adds, *"I will be a Father to you."* That is family language. It reaches into the warmest, closest kind of relationship we can know. This is not the language of reluctant permission. It is the language of covenant affection.

That promise is especially comforting because it tells us that God's holiness does not cancel His tenderness. He does not welcome His people reluctantly, as though He were merely tolerating them. He receives them as a Father receives His

children. That means the goal of separation is not cold distance, but warm fellowship. God is not calling you away from joy. He is calling you away from what destroys joy so that you may enjoy the sweetness of communion with Him.

The Old Testament background strengthens the promise. God's covenant language already anticipated this kind of nearness and belonging, and Paul uses it here to remind believers that holiness is not loss. It is the road into deeper communion with the Father. Isaiah 52:11 also carries the same note... those who belong to the Lord are called to come out and be clean because they are His. Separation here is not retreat into fear. It is readiness for fellowship.

That is where the balance matters so much. We do not separate in order to earn our standing with God. We separate because God has already made us His people. We do not clean ourselves up in order to become sons and daughters. We pursue holiness because we already are sons and daughters by grace. That order is essential. Grace saves first, and holiness follows as the fruit of that saving grace.

Here is a final illustration... When my children were young, we would go camping. I can remember when my son Noah was young, about 7 or 8 years old, he wandered off with his friends and got really dirty. He was not less of a child for being dirty, and he certainly was not less than my own child. The dirt does keep him from enjoying certain things until he is brought back and cleaned up. In the same way, sin and compromise do not change our justification, but they do damage our fellowship. God's call to separation is a call to live consistently with the sonship He has already given.

That is why the believer who has drifted should not assume that repentance will lead only to shame. Repentance leads home. The Father does not turn away the child who comes back broken and dirty. He welcomes him, cleanses him, and restores fellowship. The warning of this passage is real, but so is the promise. If we come to God on His terms, He receives us with grace.

And that sonship is not fragile because it rests on the Father's promise, "*I will be a Father to you.*" That means as a born-again believer your security is not in your performance but in God's faithful love. At the same time, the believer's fellowship is shaped by obedience. You cannot enjoy close communion with God while refusing the holiness He calls you to embrace.

So Paul ends where he began...with relationship. Open hearts, clear separation, holy identity and warm family fellowship all belong together. This is not

about earning God's love. It is about living in the good of the relationship He has already given.

As we come to the end of this passage, we are reminded that God is not merely concerned with outward conduct. He is concerned with the heart, because the heart shapes everything else. Paul's call to the Corinthians is still God's call to us: open your heart to truth, separate from unbelief, live as God's temple, and enjoy fellowship as His children.

Conclusion

So this passage leaves every one of us with a decision. Will we open our hearts to truth, or will we keep resisting what God says? Will we draw clear lines where God draws clear lines, or will we keep trying to live with divided loyalties? Will we remember that we belong to the living God, or will we keep treating holiness as optional? The answer to those questions reveals far more than our preferences. It reveals the direction of our hearts.

For the believer who is walking faithfully, this passage is a reminder to keep going. Do not grow careless with your affections. Do not make peace with compromise. Do not let the world shape your loyalties. You belong to the living God. You are His temple, and you are His child. That is your identity, and it is meant to shape every relationship, every decision, and every desire.

For the believer who is struggling, this passage is both a warning and an invitation. If your heart has grown tight, if your affection for Christ has cooled, if you have begun to drift toward compromise, then do not harden yourself further. Return to the Lord. Open your heart again to His Word. Confess what is sinful. Turn from what is unclean. The God who calls you to holiness is also the God who welcomes the repentant. He does not cast off His children when they come home broken; He receives them with mercy.

And for the one who is not a believer, this passage is a serious reminder that separation from unbelief begins with belonging to Christ. You cannot live as God's child if you are still outside His family. You cannot enjoy fellowship with the Father while remaining in rebellion against His Son. But the good news is that Christ receives sinners. He cleanses the unclean, brings the far off near, and makes strangers into sons and daughters. So turn from sin, trust in Christ, and come to the God who says, "*I will be a father to you.*" If you have questions about this, come and talk with me or any of the pastors or elders here and we would love to pray with you.

Associate Pastor Dan Burleson, Cornerstone Community Church

So let us leave this passage with humble hearts, clear convictions, and renewed gratitude. May God keep us open to His truth, faithful in our separation, holy in our living, and joyful in our fellowship with Him.

Let's pray.