

## **Cling to the Promises**

Westview Church | 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 | Pastor Brett Toney | May 24, 2026

### **The Carrot or the Stick**

The carrot or the stick—which do you find more motivating? Does the promise of reward spur you onward? Or is the threat of consequences what drives you? I would guess most of us prefer the incentive of the carrot for ourselves but make use of the stick for others. We are nearing the end of the first major section of 2 Corinthians this morning. Paul has described and defended his apostolic ministry. And as he moves to make application for the Corinthians, would you expect the carrot or the stick? There are three clear directives here at the end of chapter six: don't be yoked, cling to the promises, cleanse yourself. But are those directives given as a carrot or a stick? In short, Paul is saying here, "Beloved, cleanse yourselves by clinging to the promises as the temple of God." Church, we are in just as much need to cling to these promises.

### **Don't Be Yoked (2 Corinthians 6:14-16)**

Our passage starts with a bit of a jarring command: don't be yoked. Just before this, Paul expressed his warm affection for this church. This command then can feel a little like whiplash. That affection is a theme he returns to in 7:2. That makes this whole passage a distinct unit, 6:14-7:1. (That's also why this chapter break is a pretty bad one.) How does this command follow from the desire for reconciliation and his apostolic ministry? It's not all disconnected. I think Paul's thought process is something like this: "I freely proclaim Christ and him crucified. I boast in my weakness for Christ's glory. He commissioned me for this work. You are recipients also of this grace. And I have no ill will toward you. Therefore, don't be yoked." This directive to not be yoked is a more specific application of the broader call to cleanse ourselves.

I think there is more going on in Corinth than just deceiving "super apostles" and a tense relationship with *this* apostle. The church problems called out in 1 Corinthians are likely still at

play. Sin in other areas of life and church is hindering their warm affection for Paul. He put his thumb on a sore spot, and they didn't like that. So, their relational conflict is not just about their conflict. Sin is never so easily sectioned off. Sin is like syrup on waffles. You think you are containing it in this little square but it overflows into the other squares in the wedge of waffle. Soon enough, it is over all the waffle, puddling on the plate, and overflowing onto the table. It makes a mess of everything.

And Paul is focusing on this experience in Corinth of unequal yoking. He draws the imagery from the prohibition in Deuteronomy 22:10 to not plow with an ox and donkey together. The uniting of the two kinds is not good. God's people are to be separate from the nations. God's people are to be holy. That's what Paul emphasizes with his five questions, these five pairings. Righteousness and lawlessness. Light and darkness. Christ and Belial. Believer and unbeliever. Temple of God and idols. Paul doesn't spell out a specific issue. And that makes the command broadly applicable. Don't be united with any sin, with any idolatry. Don't have close partnerships with unbelievers, whether in marriage, in business, in friendship. It's why as a church we have meaningful membership. We commit together to be separate in godliness from the world. We don't yoke ourselves with unbelievers—or the sin and idolatry they pursue.

### **Cling to the Promises (2 Corinthians 6:16-18)**

And Paul gives a fundamental reason for this command. "Why" we should not be yoked plays off that final pairing about the temple and idolatry. Verse 16—we forsake all lawlessness and darkness, "*Because* we are the temple of the living God." That is a descriptive statement. We *are* God's temple. Like King Josiah cleansed the temple from idolatry (cf. 2 Kings 23), so King Jesus cleansed us from the idols of the heart. The living God now dwells in us. I did not intentionally plan this passage for Pentecost today. But this is exactly what Paul is talking about.

God's Spirit was poured out to dwell in us like a temple. That is why we are not to be yoked with unrighteousness. God has and is fulfilling these promises to us.

Look at these quotations in v.16-18. These are the promises we cling to. Do you notice anything about them? They are relational promises. They are promises of restoration. But they are from the Old Testament. They are promises made to Israel and her king. Yet Paul says in v.1 that *we* have these promises. Promises made to Israel are promises that Christians possess. Paul is demonstrating the unity of the Bible. What God was doing in Exodus, what the prophets were foretelling in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—it has all come to fruition in Christ and the outpouring of his Spirit. The promise of God dwelling and walking among his people is from Exodus (cf. Ex 29:45). This is covenant language: “I will be their God and they shall be my people.” That’s what God promised to do through the exodus from Egypt. The tabernacle and temple were each made so that God might dwell among his people. It’s all so that his people would be restored to him in covenant faithfulness.

The second set of promises in v.17-18 are drawn from the prophets Ezekiel (Ezek 20:41), Nathan (2 Sam 7:14), and Isaiah (Isa 43:6). They were first given to King David and God’s people in exile. Yet Paul applies them to you, Christian. God promises to welcome *you*. He promises to be a father to *you*. *You* are his son or daughter. This is the outworking of what Paul said earlier in 2 Corinthians 1:20, “All the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ].” God established us together in Christ through his death and resurrection. And he has anointed us, sealed us, and gave his Spirit *in us* as a guarantee (1:21-22). Since the Fall in Genesis 3, God has been working his singular plan of redemption for *you*.

Couched in the middle of these promises is the call to holiness. Verse 17 is from Isaiah 52. It was a call to Israel exiled in Babylon. “Go out from their midst ... Be separate ... Touch

no unclean thing.” Clear commands. A stick goading God’s people on to holiness. But they were in exile. They were powerless. They needed a New Exodus. They needed a New Covenant. The promises of God needed fulfillment. And now that the Man of Sorrows was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, chastised for our peace, wounded for our healing (Isaiah 53:3,5)—we cling to the promises. God has surely delivered us from all lawlessness, from all darkness, from all idolatry, from all unbelief. And he is ours. And we are his. He is our Father. We are his sons and daughters. O Church, cling to the promises.

### **Cleanse Yourself (2 Corinthians 7:1)**

Or, 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.” The reason why we have the promises is to empower the directive to cleanse yourself. Paul is not coming down hard on the Corinthians. He is not scolding them or rebuking them. He’s not disappointed in them. He writes, “Beloved.” His compassion toward them is rich. He doesn’t even write this call to holiness as a direct command. *And* he includes himself in it. Because of the preciousness of the promises of God, Paul pleads that the Corinthians join him in going after godliness. “Beloved, let us cleanse ourselves!” He holds out the carrot of God’s promises to them as the reason for holiness.

Do you know how to cleanse yourself by clinging to the promises? One pastor has described this as “living by faith in the purifying power of future grace.”<sup>1</sup> Here’s a simple example. Kids, here’s how you cleanse yourself by clinging to the promises. I think sometime this afternoon my kids will ask for some kind of treat. Let’s say it’s a popsicle. They really want to just go to the freezer and grab one. I can tell them, “No. No popsicles for you.” They should obey that. But what if I tell them, “No, don’t grab and sneak away with a popsicle. I will make

homemade ice cream for after dinner if you don't." And they believe me. I'm their dad. I wouldn't outright lie to them. My promise of something *better* empowers them to obey.

But how about something a little more substantial. How about bitterness? Paul says in Ephesians 4:31 to put away all bitterness. Don't hold a grudge. Don't brood over wrongs done against you. Don't plot vengeance. Put away bitterness. We should obey. We can try to will ourselves to not be bitter. We can read about how bad bitterness is.<sup>2</sup> We can repent every time we sense bitterness. Or we can remind ourselves of the promise of God's future grace. God promises to be gracious toward us by carrying out justice. He says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" (Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 12:19). We can cling to that promise that God has delivered me. God has made me his own. He is my God. He is a good Father. He will make good on that promise. So I can let go of my bitterness. By faith, I trust he will do justly. And all of God's love toward me wells up in me. It overflows through me to that person I had bitterness toward. And as I set my trust on God's promise, I am cleansed. Bitterness decreases. And by my regard and reverence for God, the intended purpose of my holiness is advanced.

So, is it the carrot or the stick that Paul uses to motivate? There are certainly elements of both here. Yet in his affection for his beloved Corinthians, he emphasizes the carrot. We need to avoid or put off the yoke with unbelievers. We need to cleanse ourselves. But we do so clinging to the promises. It's been said, "Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning."<sup>3</sup> And that's what the promises are for. We cleanse ourselves because we *have been* cleansed. "We *are* the temple of the *living* God." Our effort to cleanse ourselves does not earn our temple status. No, it's living consistent with that status. It is living by faith in the sanctifying power of the promises. These promises were secured for us in Christ and guaranteed by the Spirit. So, Church, cleanse yourself by clinging to the promises.

- <sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2012).
- <sup>2</sup> cf. Thomas Chalmers, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection” (sermon, 1825)
- <sup>3</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006)