

Holy Fear
II Corinthians 6:11-7:1

What's all this stuff about the fear of God? Ever since we were little kids in Sunday School, we've been taught that God is love. And we all know John 3:16 by heart – "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." How can we fear Someone Who loves us that much?

And what's all this about holiness? In our culture, that word is usually used negatively – we often describe snooty people as being "holier than thou." And who in the world could possibly be perfect in holiness in this life, beset as we are by so many temptations?

And look at verse 17 where Paul says, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate." How can we possibly be ambassadors for Christ, as Paul told us back in chapter 5, if we have to separate ourselves from everyone who's not a Christian? How does anything in this passage make sense?

Well, let's start with the last question, and go back to verse 14, where Paul discusses the sort of relationships Christians should have with those who don't yet trust Jesus. Here, he says we should not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. That doesn't say we shouldn't have anything to do with them – it means we shouldn't be bound together with them like two animals are when they are pulling the same cart or plow.

Now, at this point, Paul's Jewish readers would instantly have thought about one of the Laws of Moses – Deuteronomy 22:10 says, "You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together." And when we compare that law to Paul's teaching, we New Testament folks can get a better idea of how these sorts of symbolic laws can inform our everyday lives, how we can take the general principle of these laws and apply them to our modern culture.

So, what does this particular law tell us? It doesn't say we can't keep oxen and donkeys in the same pasture, and it doesn't say we shouldn't let them eat from the same trough. No, it just says we shouldn't yoke them together to accomplish a particular task. For what would happen if you tried it? What if you tried to harness a bull and a donkey using the same wooden yoke? It wouldn't fit both animals – oxen pull from their shoulders, and horses and donkeys pull from their chests – that's why they use collars. But even if you did manage to put the same yoke on both animals, they differ so much in size that it would be hard for them to pull straight. And let's face it - their difference in strength would be a big problem as well – a little donkey wouldn't add very much to the strength of a big bull, after all. Trying to yoke a bull and a donkey would only end in frustration.

Paul thus applies this law to how we relate to different kinds of people. It means we should avoid certain kinds of coordinated activity, we shouldn't form mismatched partnerships with those who don't share our faith in Christ. And why is that? Well, like the ox and the donkey, there's a difference in strength – we have the power of the Holy Spirit available to us, while unbelievers are limited to their human abilities.

But perhaps most importantly, there's a fundamental difference in the way we pull, a difference in the shape and focus and direction of our lives. Christians are focused on the Giver, while unbelievers are focused on His gifts. Christians focus on the Creator, while unbelievers are preoccupied with His

creation. Or to use another metaphor, those who belong to Christ are swimming upstream against the self-centered, materialistic current of worldly culture, while unbelievers are happy to drift downstream. So, just as you can't yoke two animals who are pulling in different ways or trying to perform two different tasks, you can't form any sort of a partnership with someone who has fundamentally different objectives.

So it turns out that this Old Testament Law can help us understand what holiness really means. It's not thinking we need our own pasture or our own trough – it's not proud isolation from others or thinking of ourselves as somehow better than they are. No, to be holy simply means to be set apart, principally to be set apart for God. Thus, holiness is more about the direction, the purpose of our lives than it is about any particular sort of behavior.

And that's because, when you get right down to it, all human beings are either moving toward God or away from Him. All of us are either moving toward God's law of love or away from Him in self-centered lawlessness. We are either moving toward the light or heading out into the darkness.

And so we can see that being set apart for God must also involve being set apart from sin, set apart from anything that displeases God, anything that is contrary to His good and perfect will. That's why Paul says in verse 17 that we must turn away from anything in our lives that is unclean in God's sight. It's just not possible to be drawing closer to God and at the same time discounting everything He thinks is right and good. Loving God necessarily involves obeying him.

But there's an even greater reason that Christians are called to a life of holiness, a reason we find in verse 16. If we are trusting in Christ, He has given us His Holy Spirit. That means God is not just living with us – He is living in us. That's the amazing truth – all believers put together are the Body of Christ, connected to Him just as closely as our heads are to our bodies. Collectively, Paul says we are nothing less than the Temple of the living God.

To prove this point, Paul quotes from two Old Testament passages. Verse 16 points us back to Leviticus 26:12, where God makes this beautiful promise: "I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people." But this promise is set in the context of God's people being faithful to Him as well, walking in His statutes and keeping His commandments. Yes, God promises protection and prosperity to His people, but this promise is specifically made to those who seek to live the way He wants us to. Again we see that holiness is necessary for any healthy relationship with God.

In verse 17, Paul quotes from our responsive reading in Isaiah to make the same connection between holiness and a relationship with God. We are to separate ourselves from anything unclean in God's sight, we are to purify ourselves precisely because we are carrying the vessels of the Lord. And those who seek to avoid evil in this way receive the promise that God will surround us on every side: "The Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard."

But if we must be holy in order for God to live with us, how is such holiness possible for sinners like us? The very next verse in Isaiah 52 begins to give us the answer. For here, God explains how His Servant, the promised Messiah, would be exalted in His sight. His appearance would be marred, because He would be despised and rejected by men. He would be a man who carried our sorrows and bore our griefs. And by going to the cross for us, Jesus fulfilled this prophecy, for He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. The only way any of us can be holy, the only way any of us

can be the sons and daughters of God, as Paul says in verse 18, is for the Lord to lay on Jesus all our sins, and thus for Him to make us holy.

But isn't the cross of Christ the best reason we should seek to make real in our lives what God has already declared to be true? Shouldn't Christ's sacrifice make us want to live into the holiness of Christ, to be set apart for God and to be set apart from sin? If God loves us enough to make us His sons and daughters, and if God gave up His only begotten son so that we might be adopted into God's family, why shouldn't we want to live for Him? Why shouldn't we want to do what pleases Him and avoid what He doesn't like?

And so we come to the last of our questions – how can this love for God be consistent with fearing Him? Well, in the first place, this sort of fear isn't the kind of abject terror that you might feel if you were to be surrounded by armed thugs in a dark alley. No, that sort of fear would be a logical response to their brutal combination of power, selfishness and callous indifference. And that's the kind of fear unbelievers would have if they considered God to be real – they would suspect His motives and resent His authority and thus wouldn't want to have anything to do with Him. That's the kind of fear the demons had of Jesus when He was casting them out of their victims.

But there's another, a healthier kind of fear – the sort of thing that little children experience when their parents are around – the sort of awe and respect that's mixed with love. After all, little children know mama and daddy love them, and they are just as sure that mama and daddy can fix any problem and will always take care of them. But this is combined with another certainty – that mama and daddy's rules have to be followed or else you get a swat on the backside. That's the kind of healthy, loving fear, the awe and respect and reverence for God that all believers should have. It is that sort of fear of God that should move us to cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, making our holiness more perfect.

Moreover, it is precisely that loving fear of God that should inspire us to mingle with those who don't yet trust the Lord Jesus, even while we remain separate from the ways they live. It's that loving fear of God that should keep us from going along with the ways of the sinful world, even while we continue to call sinners out of those ways into the same sort of relationship with God that we have. We know God loves us. We know God died for us. And we know that if sinners keep drifting away from God, they'll never know the joy of experiencing His love. They'll never know the peace and safety that comes from belonging to Him. They'll never know the strength that comes from having His Holy Spirit living within us.

So, that's our charge. Because God has made all who trust in Christ His children, because we love God and because we fear Him in a loving way, we must keep ourselves separate from sin, seeking always to please Him and do what He wants. And as He wants us to be ambassadors for Christ, we must work and live among those who need to know Him or know Him better, allowing our pursuit of holiness to demonstrate the truth of our love for God so that they too might be saved.