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WE'VE BEEN PLAYING IN *THAT*?
2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

When you're a kid you do a lot of things you would never do as an adult. Do you remember raking a big pile of leaves in the fall and then jumping into the pile? Do you remember swimming in the ocean when it was arctic cold, you're shivering and your lips are turning blue but you insist to your parents that you're not cold because you're having so much fun in the water? Do you remember Slip and Slide, that sounded like so much fun but you ended up being incredibly itchy from the wet grass on your skin? Do you remember after a big rainstorm how much fun it was to play football in the mud? It's been years since I would do something like that because with bad footing your chances of pulling a muscle, already high after a certain age, become astronomical. Plus, somewhere in growing up I lost my fascination with having mud on me.

I got a kick out of an account of a particular mud football game that is in Mike Howerton's book, *Glorious Mess*. When he was a kid after a particularly large rainstorm he and his neighborhood buddies discovered a place with two inches of standing water that made a seemingly ideal football field. They sloshed and slid around in the mud and had a blast. Every tackle would send a guy sliding for many yards. The ball was as slick as a greased pig, making for lots of fumbles, dashes for the ball and lots of laughter. Mike remembers tackling Craig, one of his pals, and they slid for what felt like 4 miles. When they got up he noticed something stuck on his friend's back. They hadn't paid attention to the fact that where they chose to play was next to a large concrete sewage runoff drain. Mike looked more closely at the back of Craig's shoulder and realized what it was. It was a piece of toilet paper! At that point he got a clue, and he now observed there was something he hadn't noticed before for some reason – this mud seemed rather more pungent smelling than the usual mud football game. The truth hit him. He yelled to his buddies, "Guys, we're playing in POOP WATER!" The game ended immediately.

You and I have been playing in poop water too. Only we're not playing football, we're living our whole lives in it. It is the culture in which we live. It is a culture that seemingly on a daily basis takes vulgarity, crudity and rudeness to new lows. Philippians 4:8 calls on us to think on whatever is noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, and worthy of praise. Our culture encourages us to focus on whatever is base, wrong, perverted, ugly, and disgusting. Lest you think this is unusual, you should remember that human society since Genesis 3 has been shaped by Satan's

influence, thus has always canted heavily away from God's truth. As it is today it always has been spiritual poop water. Playing in physical poop water can make you sick. Living in spiritual poop water make us spiritually sick. It can make our spiritual health very fragile, the opposite of what we've been hoping to accomplish in this study of antifragility. We have been thinking about this idea of being antifragile, meaning not just able to withstand stress and chaos, but to actually gain from it. There are examples of antifragility in the world around us, such as our own muscles, which only grow stronger by being stressed. The airline industry is another example. We hate it when a plane crashes, but every time that happens the industry as a whole gets better because they learn from the accidents and adjust to become safer. We want to become people who don't just survive chaos and stress but gain from it. That requires that we deal with our poop water environment. 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 gives us a clue about this. This passage has one main message, one principle truth.

ONE PRINCIPLE: DON'T HAVE A JOKE OF A YOKE

The principle is stated in verse 14. Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. The crucial Greek word used in the verse is *heterozugeo*. The root of it is the verb *zugo* which means to yoke. Added to it is *heteros*, meaning different, a word we're familiar in English. So don't be differently yoked with someone who does not believe in Jesus.

I don't harness oxen to plows or donkeys to wagons so this image is foreign to me. I tried to think of how this idea might show up in my life. I decided the answer is socks. Isn't it mysterious how washers and dryers eat socks? I don't know how it happens but it seems like socks occasionally just disappear into them. But it's always just one sock, isn't it? You never lose a pair of socks. You just lose one. Is there anything more useless than one sock? The problem is you can't differently yoke socks together. I have this blue sock that has lost its mate and this white sock that has done the same. I'll just put them together. The white sock and the blue sock can serve the purpose for which socks are created. They can cover your feet just as well as a matched set, but if you make a habit of going around wearing differently yoked socks you stand a good chance of ending up on the *What Not To Wear* television show.

So Paul tells us who follow Jesus, don't try to be a matched set with people who don't follow Jesus. Do not be weirdly yoked together with unbelievers. That's a bad mismatch. It's like trying to win the Iditarod dog sled race with a team of huskies yoked to Chihuahuas.

That's the theme of this entire section of Scripture. Paul hammers away at this one idea that Jesus followers shouldn't be matched to those who do not believe in Jesus. He asks a series of questions like what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? That's like asking what do right and wrong have in common? Nothing, they are opposites! If I ask you what 2 plus 2 is and you answer 176,213, what does that have in common with 4, the correct answer? Well, they are both numbers, but that's about all. They are completely different.

What fellowship does light have with darkness? Do they hang out together? Do they like to go to the movies or ball games with each other? I did a little investigation on this one. I went into our bedroom one night, turned off all the lights and closed the door. It was totally dark. Then I turned on one little light. Instantly it was light in the room. It was not dark anymore. I let a little light in and darkness just disappeared. I said, "Come on, guys, can't we all just get along? Can't you be a little more mature and play nicely with each other?" They refused. It was either light or dark.

Paul asks, "what harmony is there between Christ and Belial?" Belial meant "worthlessness" but it came to be a euphemism for Satan. Literally Paul asked "what *sumphonesis* is there between Christ and Satan?" We get our word "symphony" from it. What symphony do Christ and Satan play together? Do you think they formed a band so they could play some cool licks together? Absolutely not. They are implacable enemies who are at war with each other.

So it goes in this passage. The believer and an unbeliever are going in totally different directions. Imagine a train with an engine on the front and one at the back. What if the one in front was trying to pull the train north and the one in back was trying to pull it south? That's a picture of unbeliever and believer yoked together. It would be a joke. So, Paul says in verse 17, "come out from them and be separate. Touch no unclean thing." In 7:1 he says, "Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit."

So Christians are supposed to have nothing to do with those who are not Christians? We have friendships with some of our neighbors who are not Jesus followers. Is that wrong? Laurie teaches music to kids who do not believe in Jesus, is she disobeying God? I've been on sports teams with non-Christians and counted them as friends. Is this wrong?

This idea that Christians must have nothing to do with those who do not believe in Jesus has led to all sorts of mischief historically. It has created believers who want

nothing to do with “sinners,” the very people Jesus seemed to appeal to most strongly. It has led to believers who have a weird standoffish attitude toward those who are not believers in Jesus as though being a non-Christian is contagious and a person might catch unholiness from them. Such an attitude is naturally perceived by others as a “holier-than-thou” attitude.

This idea that we must “separate” from the world had Christians retreating to monasteries to get away from the world and trying to create Christian communities where only Christians live. I was reading recently about one such attempt at a Christian community up near Bainbridge, Washington that is called Bartimaeus. It started in 2002. It didn’t work and in less than 5 years began breaking up with former members suing each other.

In 2 Corinthians 5:20 Paul said, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors.” How are we going to be Christ’s ambassadors to the world around us if we have nothing to do with it? If the United States sends an ambassador to France and he totally walls himself off insisting that he must have no contact with any French people, how effective is he going to be in accomplishing his mission? Jesus said we are to be his witnesses to the world, but if we have no contact with the world how can we possibly do that? Obviously that was not what Paul meant.

Some say this isn’t about having a relationship with non-believers, it’s about being tied to them. Paul had in mind some sort of close relationship like marriage or a business partnership that ties a Christian to a person who doesn’t believe in Jesus. But there is a problem with that idea. If that’s what Paul meant how does this passage fit its context? Note that in 6:13 Paul appealed to the Corinthians to “open wide your hearts” to him. In 7:2 you see the same message. “Make room for us in your hearts.” This is Paul’s appeal to them to keep a close relationship with him even after all the conflict they had gone through,

Since this appeal to stay in relationship with Paul is the message before and after this passage it is likely also the theme of this passage. If it is we have to ask what marriage or going into business with a non-believer has to do with an appeal to stay in a close relationship to Paul? It has little or nothing to do with that appeal, so if the message is “don’t marry a non-believer” then this passage seems to not fit its context at all.

This has caused some scholars to claim this passage was not part of the letter originally, that some later person in copying one of Paul’s letters dropped this section in here. But that makes no sense. Why would someone do that? More

important, there is no evidence at all that such a thing happened. This leads me to suspect that the idea of not marrying or going into business with a non-believer may not be what Paul was aiming at.

There is a clue that help us sort this out. The ancient Jewish rabbis did use the idea of being “yoked” for marriage, but they also had another use for it. When someone submitted to rabbi’s teaching he was considered “yoked” to that rabbi. This, I believe was what Paul had in mind. He was telling the Corinthians not to be yoked to the teaching or the ideas of the non-believers around them. He wanted them to have relationships with those who don’t follow Jesus, but he wanted them to carefully avoid buying into their way of thinking. He wanted them to make room in their hearts for him and stay “yoked” to his teaching.

This was a problem in Corinth. You can see a hint of it in verse 16 where Paul said, “What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?” The Christians in Corinth were still dabbling in the idolatry of their culture. In his commentary on 2 Corinthians Paul Barnett wrote (p. 343) that what Paul was addressing here was “the Corinthians’ accelerated slide toward idolatry and sexual immorality that were endemic to the community within the Achaian capital.”

Corinth was steeped in idolatry. Many of the Corinthian Christians had been idol worshipers all their lives. They were tolerant and accepting of everybody’s god. So now they believed in Jesus, but tended to keep some of the old practices because it was what they’d always done and everybody else still did. Their friends, associates and extended family members all worshiped idols and wanted to include them in their practices as they had all their lives. They didn’t want to be rude to people they loved, did they?

Our family has a love for Disney theme parks. Laurie and I just went to Disneyland and California Adventure a few weeks ago. Imagine that one member of the family suddenly started showing obvious disinterest in going to the Disney parks. When this person is invited to go to Disney he or she always has an excuse for not going. At first it would seem unusual, but after a while it would become obvious that there is a problem. Then imagine that other members of the family ask, “It seems like you’re avoiding going to Disneyland. Is there a reason?” Then the person says, “Well, in my religion that would be wrong. My conscience won’t allow me to go.” You’ve got to be kidding! It’s wrong to go to Disneyland? It’s as wholesome an activity as you can find!

That's a little like the problem many of the Corinthians faced. None of their family nor their friends would understand if they balked at going to the temple. Such a choice would seem absurd to them. They would be offended and confused by a person's refusal to participate with the family in things they had always done together, things that were the very fabric of their life together. They would likely conclude that you didn't care about them anymore.

In his commentary on 2 Corinthians David Garland said of the Corinthians (p. 345), "Their faith apparently did not create any significant social and moral realignment of their lives. For some, it was more important to maintain friendly relations with pagan acquaintances and family members and to keep their good opinion than it was to show absolute loyalty to the one God." So Paul had to make a strong case that it was wrong to participate in idolatry.

Paul is telling them it can't be "Jesus and..." It is Jesus and Jesus alone that they are to worship. There can be no compromise. Particularly this means that they are not to buy into the thinking of their culture. That tells us how this passage connects to the context. Part of the strain in Paul's relationship with the Corinthians had to do with his stand against idolatry. Now he is appealing to them not to choose idolatry instead of faithfulness to Christ and relationship with Paul. If they decide to compromise with their culture they are rejecting him.

So how does this apply to us? We're not tempted to worship idols or go visit temple prostitutes. Does this say anything to us? Yes, it speaks directly to us. We are to be ambassadors to our world. We are to be salt and light in it. This means that we have to be a part of it. We are to care about and love the non-believing people around us. However, we must avoid sliding into the world's way of thinking. It is pervasive around us, so much so that we tend to adopt it without even noticing.

A few years ago Laurie and I met a young man named Cody Davis, who was the son of some friends of our friends in Oregon. He had some musical talent and was pursuing a career in music so he was moving to Nashville. While we were visiting our friends in Oregon this past week we went out to a restaurant one night for dinner and we ran into Cody. He is still trying to make it. It has probably been 5 years since we had last seen him. I found it interesting as we talked to him to notice that he had a distinct southern accent. This is a guy who grew up in Corvallis, Oregon. Where did the southern accent come from? He didn't have it 5 years ago. Live in Nashville, and especially try to make it in the country music industry there and guess what is going to happen to your speech pattern. It's going

to start sounding like the people who live in Nashville with its southern drawl. Somehow it just seeps into your language. And that's just what happens to us in regard to our world's way of thinking. When we live around it eventually it seeps into our minds.

This passage warns us not to be yoked, not to buy what our world is selling. It warns us not to adopt, even subtly, our world's ideas. ***We are unequally yoked with unbelievers when we share their ways of thinking!***

ONE QUESTION: HOW DOES BEING BADLY YOKED MAKE US MORE FRAGILE?

If we resist the thinking of our culture that will expose us potentially to opposition, ostracism and even rejection or persecution. It will make life harder for us. So wouldn't refusing to blend in make us more, not less, fragile? If we want to be antifragile it would seem that we need to be less counter-cultural, wouldn't it?

Actually that's not true. Remember that something that is antifragile actually gains from being subjected to rough treatment or stress. So we can actually grow if we have to face resistance from our own culture. I read an interview in the *Washington Post* last week with Russell Moore, who heads the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptists. In it he was asked what he thought about the fact that many Americans are turning away from institutional religion. He had an interesting response. He said what is happening is the day is over when people essentially had cultural faith so that they thought being a good citizen meant going to church. He said, "good riddance" to that. He said, "I don't think that sort of American dream plus Jesus represented biblical Christianity at all, and in many ways it hindered it and the advance of the Gospel." The implication is that as things get less Christian looking it will require more real Christianity to live in this world by faith, and the result is the church and believers themselves will be stronger.

However, there is another aspect to this reality that refusing to knuckle under to our culture can make us more antifragile. The world's ideas are formed by what the Bible calls the "flesh." That's a sort of theological code word for human thinking that wants to live apart from God. It is the part of us that wants to do it our way and is obsessed with self. Romans 8:7 says "the sinful mind (literally the mind of the flesh) is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." In other words, the flesh-created, flesh-driven thinking of the world does not submit to God's truth. It is hostile to what God says. If what God says is true, if one refuses to accept what God says, what is the world believing? A lie. They're living by an

illusion. I think we can all agree that if you are basing your life on an illusion that will make you way more fragile. Your whole life is a house of cards that one little breeze of reality can knock down.

When I first graduated from college I worked in a ministry to college students. I made very little money. At one point I was given an extra \$400. That doesn't sound like much but in today's dollars that would be equivalent to more than \$2200. I thought of all sorts of ways I could spend it. But my dad suggested I put it in a savings account. He told me not only would it be good to have a little savings but the bank would give me interest on that money and it would grow. That wasn't nearly as exciting as some of the ideas I had for spending it, but I thought Dad probably was right, so I opened a savings account at my bank and put that \$400 in it. A month later I got a statement from the bank and I saw to my delight that I now had \$800 in that savings account. It had doubled in one month. I thought, "Wow, this interest thing is amazing. This is great!" I began calculating what would happen as that account doubled every month. In another month I'd have \$1600, a month after that I'd have \$3200. In only 6 months my savings account would be up to \$25,600. In a year I would have more than \$1.6 million. I was going to be a millionaire in a year! In two years I would be a billionaire. Becoming a billionaire was so easy I couldn't understand why lots more people weren't doing it. How hard was it to leave that \$400 in the bank for a couple of years and let it multiply into a vast fortune?

I started dreaming of what I would do with the money. I'd buy a major league baseball team because back then you could pick one up for a paltry \$50 million or so, which would be a drop in the billion dollar bucket I would have in a mere two years. I would put myself on the team and fulfill my dream of becoming a major league baseball player! This was going to be great.

How fragile were my plans and dreams? They were totally fragile because they were based on an illusion. Do the math. Back then I think banks were paying about 4% interest on savings accounts, a king's ransom by today's standards. But at 4% per annum my \$400 savings account was going to grow to something like \$416, not more than a million. The bank had made a big mistake. They were hardly likely to keep repeating it every month. Good thing I didn't act on that illusion or I could have gotten myself in trouble. If you make your decisions based on a lie, it is only a matter of time until it all blows up in your face.

Buying into the world's ideas which are contrary to God's truth, is always going to make you fragile because at some point the structure you have built on those ideas will crumble. Your life will unravel.

IMPLICATIONS

But again, we're not worshiping idols, so how might this apply to us? There are some ways we can easily let the world's thinking creep into our heads when we don't even notice. Things happen to us we don't even notice. We adopt the ideas of our culture without questioning them. Here are a couple of examples.

FATHER DOESN'T KNOW BEST, I DO

The majority of people in our society believe that God exists. Unfortunately this does not mean they know and obey the true God. Who is God? What is he like? What does he want us to be and to do? Where do people get their answers to those questions? More and more often they create them on their own.

The Bible claims to be God's revelation of himself. It claims to be the truth about who God is and what he wants us to be. In John 17:17 Jesus said to the Father "your word is truth." Psalm 33:4 says, "the word of the Lord is right and true." It asserts that it is authoritative. If this is true it is not merely a collection of good ideas they we may or may not choose to employ. Think of the difference between the United States Constitution and the menu at the Claim Jumper Restaurant. At the Claim Jumper they have many possible ideas for food you can choose to eat. They have soups, they have a salad bar, they have pizzas, pasta, chicken, ribs, shrimp, steak, hamburgers and more. You pick the ones that appeal to you and ignore the ones that do not. You do not have that option with the Constitution. You cannot simply choose to live by the parts of it that appeal to you. You must live by all of it. It is always in force in our lives at every minute. The Bible is much more like the Constitution than a menu. Yet many people decide who God is and what he wants based on nothing more than just what they think.

You will often hear people say, "I don't think God is like that," "I think God is like this," or "I don't think God cares about that." "I think God wants us to let everybody do whatever seems right to them" or "I think God wants me to be happy." You ask, "What do you base that on?" they typically will say something along the lines of, "Well, it's just what I think."

Do we operate that way anywhere else in life? Imagine that you are in an airplane that is coming in for a landing at the airport in San Francisco. The proper landing speed for this aircraft is 137 knots. You are sitting in the cockpit observing the

pilots flying the plane. You note that the plane's airspeed has dropped to 112 knots. This is disturbing to you. You say to the pilot, "Hey, uh, are you sure that we're going fast enough." He says, "Oh, absolutely, yes." Uneasy you say, "How do you know?" He answers, "Well, it's just what I think." "Oh, well, all right then. If it's what you think I'm sure it's fine." You wouldn't say that. You'd say, "Who cares what you think? What does the flight manual say?" Isn't that what matters? You'd better believe it. Ignore it, and, well, you saw the results.

You go to the doctor because you have had a terrible pain in your abdomen. You fear it might be appendicitis. You tell him about your pain. Without checking you or running any tests he says, "Oh, that's nothing to worry about. It's probably just gas. Take some Gas-X and you'll be fine." You say, "How do you know it's not something more than that?" He says, "Well, it's just what I think." "Oh good. If it's what you think I'm sure that you're right and it's no problem."

I actually had something like this happen to me. I had this weird red bump on the top of my foot. During a physical exam I asked my doctor about it. He just looked at it and said, "Oh, that's nothing to worry about. It's just a rubicunda gibba." I didn't know that's Latin for "red bump." If you give it a Latin name that implies you know what it is. But my rubicunda gibba didn't go away. After some time I got uneasy about it again. A few years later I had a different doctor. I was having my annual physical exam and I pointed out the thing, telling him a previous doctor thought it was a harmless rubicunda gibba. He said, "I'm not sure what that is. It probably is nothing, but I'd like to make sure. I'm going to do a biopsy of it just to make certain." He didn't rely on just what he thought. Good thing. It turned out to be skin cancer. I had to have it surgically removed.

We don't want "it's just what I think." We want and need what is true. Yet when it comes to the most important matter of all, who God is, what he asks of us, somehow people think "it's just what I think" is sufficient. I submit to you that's a really bad idea.

Does this thinking ever filter into our minds? Yes, sadly it does. We begin to sit in judgment on God's truth, deciding for ourselves whether we have to submit to it or not. There are places where the truth of God runs head on into ideas common in our culture, ideas about sexuality, about how a marriage should work, about what is important in life, about how to raise a family, about morality, about money, about how one's eternal destiny is decided. I find that many Christians are arriving at their conclusions about many of those issues based more on "it's just what I think" than on the basis of "this is what God says."

There is ultimately going to need to be a submission to God's truth for us to actually walk with him. A triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit who are one person, makes no sense to us. If we go with "it's just what I think" we're going to end up rejecting God. That is at the heart of the problem of Jehovah's Witnesses. In younger people the Bible is going to challenge them to abstain from sexual activity outside marriage. But the culture sees such ideas as at best archaic, at worst unhealthy. If we go with "it's just what I think" we are going to reject God's truth and make decisions that will introduce a world of fragility into our lives.

SELF SERVE YOGURT IS BEST

One of the trends that I actually like is the trend for frozen yogurt shops to be self serve. You get as much yogurt as you want from their machine, put whatever toppings on it that you want, then they simply weigh it and charge you by the ounce. It's a great plan.

It's a great plan for buying yogurt. Unfortunately our culture has taken that principle as a principle for life. Self serve is best. The message of our culture is that you should take care of yourself first. Make sure you get your share of whatever it is that you want. This is an especially mesmerizing message because it links up precisely with what our human nature defaults to. Obsession with ourselves is automatic. We don't have to choose it, it just happens. When our culture comes along and tells us that we should do this it makes a perfect storm of an alluring message.

Laurie and I were at Disneyland and we were trying to decide between three events that we wanted to see that all took place at similar times. We talked to an employee and he told us we could only get to two of the three. He recommended which two he thought we should do and we said, "Yeah, we'll do those." He then said, "Let me show you where to go to get the best view." He walked us to a spot across the street that was right next to a pole that held a crowd control rope. He said, "Stay right here. Don't move even a tiny distance from that pole, because if you do someone will move in front of you and block your view." He was absolutely right, and I knew he was. When people want something and you're in the way they don't care if their pursuit of getting what they want takes that same thing away from you. It's all about "serve yourself."

Jesus said in Matthew 16:24-25 we are to deny ourselves. If we serve ourselves what ends up happening is we lose our lives. In other words, the "serve yourself" message is a lie that ends in death. Sadly when we make life about ourselves others

become at best tools to be used for our purposes, at worst enemies because they are in the way of getting what we want. The serve yourself message is toxic for relationships. It's like the gas they pumped into our house a couple of weeks ago. It was poison and it killed everything that breathed it in. That's what serve yourself does to relationships. It poisons them.

You may think this is irrelevant, but I guarantee you that this thinking is pervasive in the church. As an example consider how people think about music. Do they approach it with the thought, "I wonder how the music works for everyone else? It doesn't matter whether I like it, I only care that it helps everyone else worship God."

A couple of years ago Laurie and I noticed some shavings under a window inside our house. It looked like a sure sign of termites. We had someone come out and inspect the house and he confirmed we needed to treat our house for termites. We took the "see no evil" approach and did nothing. To our dismay, it has not gotten better. Though we could see nothing happening, termites were eating our house. Recently it became obvious there was a problem. The experts inspected again and told us the bugs were damaging our house and we had to do something. So we tented it and killed them all.

The world's ideas are like those termites. You can't always see immediately the damage they are doing, but they are destroying your spiritual house. I challenge you to take some time to think about what our culture believes. Have a conversation at a meal about those ideas and how they might be impacting you.

Then ask God to enable you to see the lies for what they are and to reject them. Help you to see when you are a rabbit being yoked together with a Husky dog and refuse to let it happen.