

This section contains some of the most controversial verses in this entire letter (6:14–7:1). Since 7:2–3 follows so naturally from 6:11–13, some sceptics have suggested that these verses were not part of Paul’s original letter, but that they were, intentionally or mistakenly, inserted by a later editor. In point of fact, they seem to fit well with the flow of his thought. Having defended his ministry against the accusations of the superapostles (6:3–10), and having appealed to his readers to embrace him and his ministry (6:11–13), he now urges them to separate from false gospel ministry (6:14–7:1) before making one final appeal for them to receive him, his fellow ministers, and their true, gospel ministry (7:2–4). He then returns in 7:5ff to the theme from which he digressed after 2:13.

Separate from False Gospels (6:14–7:1)

These verses are some of the best known in 2 Corinthians, and are often used to argue for principles that Paul does not actually have in mind. Contextually speaking, he is not talking about mixed-faith marriages or mixed-faith business partnerships. He is talking about mixed gospels. He preached the true gospel; his critics preached a false gospel (cf. Galatians 1:6–9). He appeals to them, therefore, to break fellowship from those who distort the gospel and to instead yoke themselves to him.

As we focus on these verses, let us acknowledge that, while our specific context is not quite the same as that of the Corinthians, there are nevertheless “Christian” teachers abound in our society who actually are characteristic of lawlessness rather than righteousness, darkness rather than light, Belial rather than Christ, unbelief rather than belief, and idolatry rather than true Christian worship.

“All around us we see the church well acclimated to culture: successful, respected, wealthy, full, and growing. But are the transcendent and the holy there? In the area of belief we find widespread indifference to the Bible and ignorance of its contents—and strong resentment if a biblical word of judgment is brought to bear on the life of the congregation. In worship we find notably lacking any sense of the holy presence of God and of what worship is for.... In ethics we find the cultural ideals of friendliness and fellowship more evident than the difficult standards of the New Testament or historic Christendom.”

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Corinthian culture, you will remember, was greatly influenced by Greek philosophy, which included the prominent first-century heresy of Gnosticism. The Gnostics, we have seen, taught that the body was inherently evil and the soul inherently good, so that what was done in the body was meaningless because only the soul mattered to God. Paul has already countered that thinking several times in this letter (and in 1 Corinthians), and he will tackle it again here.

The Corinthian believers were increasingly abandoning Christlike ethics (see 7:1), and Paul here reveals the source of that: superficial worship. Worshipping a false God always results in unbiblical living. A return to biblical ethics demanded a return to Christ-centred worship. And Christ-centred worship depended on an understanding of their identity. Paul offers five reminders of their identity to help them embrace afresh God-honouring worship.

TO THINK ABOUT

Where can you see the results of an embrace of superficial worship in Christendom today? Are there specific areas of ethical compromise in the church that can be traced to an unbiblical gospel?

1. Their identity as righteous (v. 14b). The gospel that saved the Corinthians was a gospel of imputed righteousness (see 5:21). Further, Christ’s imputed righteousness is a righteousness that actually transforms our unrighteousness into righteousness (see 6:7). This is what Christ had called them to, and they must not yoke themselves to any gospel or gospel minister who would pull in another direction.

TO THINK ABOUT

In an age of permissiveness, it is not popular to hold people accountable to a righteous standard. Even within the church, appeals to righteous living are often decried as legalism. How does this verse help you think about categories of righteousness and legalism? “What is legalism”?

2. Their identity as light (v. 14c). Those who have been transformed by the gospel have been given “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (4:6). As God is light, so Christians are called to live as lights in the world (John 8:12). The Corinthians must therefore not align with any gospel or gospel minister who encouraged darkness rather than light.

3. Their identity in Christ (v. 15a). As those “in Christ” the Corinthians were new creations (5:17). They must therefore live a life characteristic of Christ, not of the devil, and must therefore avoid gospel associations with the messengers and the message of Belial.

TO THINK ABOUT

The word “Belial” is a translation of a word that literally means “useless” or “worthless.” Does it seem harsh that Paul was accusing the superapostles of being “worthless”? Why, or why not?

4. Their identity as believers (v. 15b). As believers—those who faith rested in Christ and his gospel—the Corinthians were called to live a life in keeping with the gospel. They must not align with those who would call them to believe a gospel contrary to the gospel of Christ, which he has so vigorously defended.

5. Their identity as God’s temple (v. 16a). Both as a body of believers (1 Corinthians 3:16–17), and as individual believers (1 Corinthians 6:19–20), the Corinthians were the temple of God. The temple was a place separated and devoted to true worship. They must not allow themselves, or their church, to be defiled by the idolatry of the superapostles.

Paul then quotes from two Old Testament texts (Leviticus 26:12 and Isaiah 52:11) to strengthen his case. These texts call God’s people to separate from false gospels, and those who minister those gospels, and to embrace the gospel that makes us children of God (6:16b–18). As children of God, the Gnostic heresy that the body is meaningless must be rejected. The gospel drives to holy living, and lack of holy living is evidence that we have not embraced the true gospel (7:1).

TO THINK ABOUT

As a theological aside, note Paul’s claim that “we” (the church) have “these promises” that were initially made to Israel. The church inherits the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament because there is only one people of God. But what responsibility do “we”—the church—have to separate from false gospels and ministers of those gospels? When it comes to knowing and defending the true gospel, and separating from false gospels, what is the elders’ responsibility and what is the membership’s responsibility?

Embrace the True Gospel (7:2–4)

Paul brings his great digression to a close by once again appealing to the Corinthians to embrace him and his faithful gospel ministry. Since had had in no way “wronged,” “corrupted,” or “taken advantage” of them, they had no reason to reject him.

Paul did “not say this to condemn” the Corinthians. This perhaps suggests that the very things he denied—having “wronged,” “corrupted,” and “taken advantage” of them—were things of which they had accused him. He did not hold it against them, for he knew that they had been deceived by the superapostles. He assured the Corinthians of his love for them, while appealing to them to reciprocate that love.

TO THINK ABOUT

Do you get the impression, as you read 2 Corinthians, that the accusations against Paul were from a majority or a minority in the church? If a minority, to what extent do you think it at least gave the majority pause to receiving Paul? Do you see how destructive false accusation—even from a minority—can be?

Even though the Corinthians had unjustly rejected Paul and thereby caused him great harm, he harboured no bitterness toward them. He was not oblivious to faults in the church, nor did he paper over the sins of others, but seeing sin in the church did not cause him to reject the church. Even though it was the cause of his deepest pain, the church was also the source of his greatest joy and the object of his deepest and most abiding love. This can only be explained by the fact that he was committed to loving the Christ loved.