

Working with Nonbelievers (2 Corinthians 6 verses 14–18)

From the Theology of Work Project

The question of being mismatched (literally unequally yoked) with non-Christians has implications for working relationships. Up to this point, Paul has vividly portrayed the importance of good relationships with the people with whom we live and work. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:9–10 that we should work with non-Christians, and he discusses how to do so in 1 Corinthians 10:25–33.

In 2 Corinthians 6:14–18, Paul cautions us about working arrangements with non-believers, invoking a reference to Deuteronomy 22:10 which warns against plowing with an ox and a donkey yoked together. Perhaps this is because the donkey would struggle to pull the ox's load and the ox could not go at the faster donkey's pace. In 2 Corinthians, Paul seems to be talking about a deeper spiritual reality, advising God's people to be wary of yoking with people who serve lawlessness, darkness, idol worship, and Satan himself.

While we're clearly called to love, serve, and work with non-believers, Paul says not to be unequally yoked with them. What does it mean to be unequally yoked? The answer lies in the contrast to being yoked with Jesus, who says, "Take my yoke upon you." (Matthew 11:29). One part of the yoke is around us, and the other is on Jesus' shoulders. Jesus, like the lead ox in a team, determines our bearing, pace, and path, and we submit to his leadership. Through his yoke, we feel his pull, his guidance, his direction. By his yoke, he trains us to work effectively in his

team. His yoke is what leads us, sensitizes us, and binds us to him. Being yoked to Jesus makes us partners with him in restoring God's creation in every sphere of life. No other yoke that would pull us away from the yoke of Jesus could ever be equal to that! "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light," Jesus tells us in Matthew 11:29. Yet the work we are doing with him is no less than the transformation of the entire cosmos.

When Paul tells us not to be unequally yoked in working relationships, he is warning us not to get entangled in work commitments that prevent us from doing the work Jesus has for us or that prevent us from working in Jesus' yoke. This has a strong ethical element. "What partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness?" Paul asks in 2 Corinthians 6:14. If the dictates of a work commitment lead us to harm customers, deceive constituents, mislead employees, abuse co-workers, pollute the environment, or such, then we have been yoked into a violation of our duties as stewards of God's kingdom. Being yoked with Jesus leads us to work to reconcile and renew the world in light of God's promises of the kingdom come.

To be unequally yoked with unbelievers, then, is to be in a situation or relationship that binds you to the decisions and actions of people who have values and purposes incompatible with Jesus' values and purposes. We probably would—and should—do all we can to avoid working with those who would force us to act against our beliefs. But short of that, many of the motivations, values, and working methods of our supervisors and colleagues in most workplaces may not be compatible with our beliefs as Christians. And the environment and beliefs of

those you work with may have a negative influence on your faith and experience of the Christian life. Nonetheless, most of us work among unbelievers, which as we have noted, Paul assumes is the normal situation for Christians. Then how are we to apply his prohibition against unequal yoking?

Let's begin by looking at employment. Employment is an agreement in which you do the agreed upon work in return for the agreed upon remuneration. To the extent that you are able to voluntarily and justly terminate this contract in the event it becomes damaging to you or others, you are free to un-yoke. How do you know whether it is necessary to un-yoke or end an employment arrangement? We will look at two very different situations.

First, imagine you are employed by an organization that is generally ethical, but you are surrounded by people who do not believe as you do and whose influence is damaging your own faith life. This discernment may be different for different believers. Some are able to maintain their faith in the midst of temptations and unbelief all around them, and others are not. Temptations such as money, power, sexual immorality, and recognition can be overwhelming in many work environments, and Paul's prohibition would suggest that it is better to remove yourself from that employment "yoke" than be defiled in body and spirit or to compromise your relationship with the Lord. On the other hand, others are able to work in the midst of those temptations as a witness to the truth and love and hope of the gospel. Usually they need someone outside the temptations of their workplace to help them maintain their faith.

Esther is an interesting example of this kind of situation. In Esther 4:12-16 God called her into the harem of King Ahasuerus so that she would be able to serve as protector of her Jewish people. The temptations of that work were to protect her status and privilege as the king's chosen queen. She might have succumbed to the temptations of that luxurious life if her uncle, Mordecai, hadn't checked in with her daily to guide her and eventually summon her to risk her life to save her people.

Esther had considerable influence with the king but was also extremely vulnerable to his displeasure. This would seem to be a clear case of being unequally yoked. Yet in the end, her yoking to God proved stronger than her yoking to the king because she was willing to risk her life in order to do God's will. This suggests that the more willing you are to suffer the consequences of saying *no* when called upon to violate your beliefs, the tighter the relationship you can take on with unbelievers, yet still remain yoked to Jesus. An important implication of this is to refrain from becoming so dependent on a job that you can't afford to quit. If you take on expenses and debts up to, or even above, your level of income, any job can quickly become a kind of unequal yoking. Adopting a more modest standard of living and building up ample savings—if possible—may make it much easier to remain yoked with Christ if things go bad at work.

A second example of unequal yoking might be a business partnership with an unbeliever. It would be a much more equal partnership in terms of power, but equally risky in terms of ethics. When one partner signs a contract, spends money, buys or sells property—or violates the law—the other partner is bound by that

action or decision. This kind of partnership could be more like the ox and the donkey – two partners pulling in opposite directions. Moreover, we know from experience that even partnerships between two believers also include some risk, given that Christians continue to be sinners too. All business partnerships, then, require wisdom and discernment and both the ability and the willingness to terminate the partnership if necessary, even if doing so would be very costly. Paul’s prohibition in 2 Corinthians 6 should, at a minimum, serve as a cause for prayer and discernment before entering a partnership, and perhaps to including contractual limitations to the arrangement.

There are many other kinds of working relationships, of course, including buying and selling, investing, contracting and subcontracting, and trade associations. Paul’s warning against unequal yoking can help us discern how and when to enter into such relationships, and perhaps more importantly, how and when to exit them. In all these relationships, the danger increases when we become more dependent on them than on Christ.

Finally, we must be careful to not turn Paul’s words into an us-versus-them mentality against nonbelievers. We cannot judge or condemn nonbelievers as inherently unethical because Paul himself refused to do so. “For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those who are inside that you are to judge? God will judge those outside” (1 Corinthians 5:12–13). The truth is that we ourselves need Christ’s grace every day to keep us from leading others astray by our own sin. We are called not to judge, but to discern whether our work is fulfilling the purposes and ways of Christ.