

THE SUNDAY SERMON
for the
Fifty-fourth Annual Convention
of the
CONCORDIA LUTHERAN CONFERENCE

delivered by

The Rev. Edward J. Worley, Pastor • St. Luke's Lutheran Church • Seattle, Washington

Text: II Corinthians 6:14 to 7:1

Dear fellow-sinners, redeemed by the blood of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ:

As a vicar at St. Mark's Ev. Lutheran Church in Sauk Village, Illinois I received this invitation from the local Roman Catholic congregation a few blocks down the road:

Dear Rev. Edward Morley:

In a spirit of Ecumenism, the Priests and People of St. James Parish extend a sincere invitation to you and your congregation to attend a 5 day COMMUNITY RETREAT here at St. James. It will be conducted by a Retreat Team from Notre Dame, consisting of Father Robert Nogosek and Beth Ann Hughes. It is hoped that those who participate will be helped spiritually in line with their own beliefs. Please return the registration form that you will find in the Villager Newspaper.

Respectfully,

/s/ Rev. Paul L. Didier, Pastor

Now what is wrong with such an invitation? There is something much more seriously wrong than the mere misspelling of my last name and giving me an honorific title I had not yet received. How should a Christian pastor respond to such ecumenical invitations? The proper response is found in our text this morning. Why must we flatly refuse to attend a retreat at St. James Catholic Church?

The LORD *Commands* Separation!

For the Scriptures teach us:

- I. Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers;
- II. For the LORD demands a separate people, set apart for His use.

Let us pray: Dear Lord Jesus, in the midst of doctrinal confusion, laxity and apathy, give us concerned hearts and minds regarding the teachings of Thy Holy Word. Keep us in the true faith. To this end, preserve us in a God-pleasing fellowship by Thy pure Word. In Thy Name, we pray, beloved Savior, Amen.

I.

Our text begins: *“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”* The Apostle uses a present participle ever to forbid certain behavior: *Do not even attempt, do not even try, do not even begin to be unequally yoked.* We are never to come under an unequal yoke or harness. The main point is that such a yoke is different; it is another yoke, utterly alien and foreign to that which Christians wear.

In Philippians 4:3, the Apostle mentions a *“true yokefellow,”* that is, a person who is a *genuine* yokefellow. There were many who *claimed* to be yoked together with the Apostle in the work of the Gospel, but not *all* were true, genuine. The test of genuineness is found in I Timothy 6:3-5— *“If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but dotting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness; from such withdraw thyself.”*

This test is identical to that our Lord gives us in Matthew 7:15-23— *“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. Wherefore, by their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name have cast out devils, and in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you. Depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”*

We dare not be found *“yoked together”* with those who teach contrary to God’s Word. Amos asks, *“Can two walk together, except they be agreed?”* (Amos 3:3). And here is where the unequal yoke becomes obvious!

In the Old Testament we read: *“Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together”* (Deuteronomy 22:10). Here the Lord forbade the yoking of a clean and an unclean beast. This was an unequal yoke. Even so, we dare not be found yoked with an unbeliever; it is an unequal yoke. To be connected in such a way is clearly forbidden by God. We commonly call such a yoking the sin of *“unionism.”* *“Unionism”* is uniting in fellowship with those not of one faith and confession with us. Today many use very clever arguments to seduce believers into unionistic endeavors, calling it a sin against love if we fail to unite with them. They also call us judgmental and legalistic when we label them as heterodox, as those who teach other than God’s Word teaches. But what would they call the Apostle Paul? He calls the false teachers that disturbed the church at Corinth *“unbelievers.”* Why? They preached a false Gospel, *another* Gospel (Galatians 1:8-9). They claimed sincerely to preach Christ; they claimed to be *“ministers of Christ”* (II Corinthians 11:23); but, because they adulterated

the pure Gospel, the Apostle labels them, and rightly so, “*unbelievers*” —and this in spite of the fact that they professed allegiance to Christ. As Professor J. D. Meyer notes:

We can well imagine how difficult it must have been for the Corinthians to swallow this pill. There had come to them men who were devout, who devoted themselves to the cause of the Gospel, who would present the Gospel in an attractive, fascinating way. They themselves felt that they had been greatly enriched spiritually and edified by the warm and eloquent presentation of these excellent apostles. And now Paul bluntly calls them unbelievers, and warns his readers against cooperation with them, not even making an exception for cooperation in externals. Of course, he is speaking about church work and things that have to do with church work.... Hence any cooperation with adulterators of the Gospel of justification...must be avoided. Not to do so would result in a mismatched yoke—fellowship with unbelievers. (*Ministers of Christ*, p. 134).

Now what about those who do not deny the central doctrine of justification by faith but teach false doctrine in *other* areas? Does this command also apply to *them*? Dr. Lenski has some sound words on that subject:

“With unbelievers” mentions the extreme. Some read this and the following like the Pharisees read the commandments: Thou shalt not kill, shalt not commit adultery! as if this forbids *only* the extreme. Did Jesus, then, expound in vain in Matt. 5:21, etc., by showing that every extreme includes everything of the same nature that has not yet reached that extreme? To be sure, the extremes murder and adultery must be named, for many go that far; but this forbids even the first step in that direction. This is true with regard to total unbelief which makes open mock of Christ. It includes every bit of unbelief, every repudiation of Christ’s doctrine, every little yoke that is not of the true faith. Besser is right when he finds in these yokes a reference to unionism with those who repudiate any part of the Word. (*Interpretation of I and II Corinthians*, p. 1079).

To whom then should we apply this text? Not only to those that deny justification by faith, which are rightly called “unbelievers;” but also to those who are heterodox, who teach contrary to any doctrine of Holy Scripture. Our Lutheran Confessions quote this text in reference to the Roman Catholic Church:

All Christians ought most diligently to beware of becoming partakers of the godless doctrine, blasphemies, and unjust cruelties of the Pope; but ought to desert and execrate [curse] the Pope with his members, or adherents, as the kingdom of Antichrist, just as Christ has commanded (Matt.7,15): “Beware of false prophets.” And Paul commands us to avoid false teachers and execrate them as an abomination. And in 2 Cor. 6,14 he says: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what communion hath light with darkness?” It is a grave matter wanting to separate one’s self from so many lands and nations, and to profess a separate doctrine; but here stands God’s command, that every one should beware and not agree with those who maintain false doctrine.... (*Concordia Triglotta*, p. 1061:22-23).

We must also use this text to forbid fellowship with heterodox churches. Dr. Francis Pieper wrote in 1889:

Objections have been raised against the use of this passage as proof that God has forbidden fellowship with heterodox churches. The objectors claim that this passage speaks of unbelievers, and not of erring believers. But erring churches are, to the extent that they err, also unbelieving. They are unbelieving with respect to quite a number of Bible passages.

And to this they add the terrible sin that, on the basis of their errors, they have established sectarian communions in the Christian Church. Thereby they split up Christendom and oppose, fight against, the orthodox church. Word for word, the passage, 2 Cor. 6, applies to erring churches *insofar* as they are such. It says, “*What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?*” To preach false doctrine, and to believe false doctrine, is the greatest wickedness there is, a sin against the First Commandment. Luther stresses this so frequently. He always repeats: “False doctrine is a sin against the First Commandment.” Whoever sets aside God’s Word, twists God’s Word around, puts his own meaning into God’s Word; he does not permit God to be his God; he acts unrighteously.

God often says in His Word: “*Thou shalt not steal.*” But just as clearly and even much oftener we find it said in Scripture: You shall not believe false doctrine; you shall not preach false doctrine; you shall not listen to false doctrine. Now, just as he is unrighteous who steals contrary to God’s command, so especially also is he unrighteous who, contrary to the equally clear command of God, preaches, accepts or promotes false doctrine, and that in any amount whatever. When God says you must not steal, then you should not steal even a little bit. The same holds true in respect of hearing and preaching false doctrine. You already become a partaker of unrighteousness by spreading and advancing only one doctrinal error. The first part of Christian righteousness and Christian life is the trusting acceptance of the *whole* Word of God. We read further: “*What communion hath light with darkness?*” But false doctrine is darkness, just as true, revealed doctrine is the light in this world. “*What concord hath Christ with Belial?*” All false doctrine is a work of the devil. It is lying in spiritual things against God. And the real father of this lying is the devil. Whoever supports false doctrine is doing the devil’s work.

What agreement hath the temple of God with idols? The church is God’s temple, and it is His temple for the very reason that *God’s* Word is proclaimed therein. Insofar as man’s doctrine, error, is preached in the church, you teach the worship of a different god than the true one who has revealed Himself in Scripture. Yes, insofar as a different doctrine than God’s Word is proclaimed in the church, you really turn God’s house into a temple of idols. That the coming out from among them, of which 2 Cor. 6 speaks, applies in particular to separation from the heterodox, is set forth in Rom. 16:17, where we read: “*Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses **contrary to the doctrine** which ye have learned; and **avoid them.***” (*The Difference Between Orthodox and Heterodox Churches*, pp. 27-28).

II.

How can we possibly fellowship with the unbelieving and the heterodox? Verses 16-18: “*And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God, as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.*” We are made the temple of the living God, the living God’s sanctuary, “*an holy temple in the Lord,*” “*an habitation of God through the Spirit*” (Ephesians 2:21-22), “*a spiritual house*” (I Peter 2:5), “*the church of the living God*” (I Timothy 3:15). To all who would even think to defile this temple with idols and false worship, Paul asks: “*Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are*” (I Corinthians 6:19-20). Yes, “*ye are bought with a price*” (I Corinthians 7:23a); this is how you became a holy temple in God’s sight. He paid the price. For “*the Word was made flesh and dwelt among*

us;” the Son of God tabernacled and tented among us, partaking of flesh and blood. He allowed His enemies to destroy His “*temple*,” His holy body, on the tree; and, in three days, the “*temple*” again stood; for He had promised: “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.... He spake of the temple of His body*” (John 2:19, 21).

He paid the price of our redemption with this holy sacrifice, bearing our sins in His own holy body on the tree (I Peter 2:24). The ransom was paid; for He “*was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification*” (Romans 4:25). The Lord God Almighty promises to receive you favorably, in kindness and grace, as His sons and daughters because His only-begotten Son paid your purchase price: “*He hath made us accepted in the Beloved, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.*” (Eph.1:6b-7). The Scriptures tell us most assuredly: “*When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the Law, to redeem [buy back] them that were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons*” (Galatians 4:4-5). “*Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:26). For “*as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His Name*” (John 1:12). Yes, He shed His holy, precious and innocent blood to pay for all your sins, to blot them out of God’s memory forever, so that you may be the sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty.

As thankful children, we should obey our heavenly Father who commands separation. The Lord has made us His peculiar people, consecrated and set apart for His use. As Peter explains, I Peter 2:9-10 — “*But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God; which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.*” Yes, in Christ we are made God’s saints, His holy ones, His beloved children. We should live accordingly. “*Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God*” (II Corinthians 7:1).

We have the sure and certain promises of a God who cannot lie. We know also that in Christ God confirms His promises with an oath: “*For all the promises of God in Him are yea, and in Him Amen, unto the glory of God...*” (II Corinthians 1:20). We have been given “*exceeding great and precious promises*” (II Peter 1:4), the greatest of which is salvation: “*This is the promise that He hath promised us, even eternal life*” (I John 2:25). As the children of God, we should serve God in joy and thankfulness, trusting His Word, loving His commandments, and earnestly desiring not to offend him: “*And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them*” (Ephesians 5:11).

“*Be ye not unequally yoked together!*” In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!