

Living with an unbelieving spouse

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Brian R. Wipf

I remember starting my first pastoral position at Big Spring Baptist Church and being surprised at how many women came to church without their husbands. Some of them came alone because they did not have any children; some were empty nesters and their children were married or off to college; and some women couldn't convince their children to come to church as they skipped with dad. Other women would come to church with their kids in tow. I grew up in a home where mom and dad went to church together. They shared a common faith. They both thought faith was important and worked together to raise me and my siblings in the discipline and admonition of the Lord. They made efforts in organizing family devotions (they didn't always get that perfectly, but they tried). They both were committed to regular church attendance. I can honestly say in all my years as a boy and then a teenager, I never remember a single Sunday where I was left scratching my head wondering why Dad didn't want to go to church. My mother never had to give an excuse why our father was going to stay home while we went off to worship. I count my parents' shared faith a blessing of the Lord in my life.

That's why my experience at Big Springs was surprising; it just was so different than what I was used to. But here in this relatively small country church, which had maybe an average attendance of about 160-170 on a Sunday morning, I would say about a dozen women came to church alone without their husbands. There were a couple of men who also came without their wives. Their spouses did not share their faith.

Last week, we talked about being a single Christian is uniquely challenging; another big challenge is being married to someone who doesn't share your faith. We share so much with our spouses; to not be united at the fundamental level of faith impacts almost every other aspect of our lives. How we raise our kids, how we use our time, what we value and concern ourselves with as a family, our friendships and where we hang out with our friends, the use of our money and so much more are all impacted by this disunity in faith. And what about the internal struggles? The feelings of loneliness. The struggle to know how much to talk about faith with your unbelieving wife or husband or the fear if you bring it up it's going to start a fight. Knowing what to tell the kids about why Dad or Mom doesn't believe in Jesus and what will happen to them if they die. It's all so hard.

That's why the scriptures tell followers of Jesus to be careful about the associations we make and the relationships we begin. Let's look at our first passage this morning in 2 Corinthians 6 (READ vs. 14-7:1). The very end of this section, vs. 1 of chapter 7, I think, reveals Paul's intent for this paragraph. He's wanting this church to be free from everything that would keep them from living holy and devoted lives to the Lord. He's trying to help them remain grow and mature in faith; that should be our goal, too. Maturing more and more in our relationship with Jesus where we know him more and more ought to be our principle focus. And God has promised us that will happen if we keep following him. He will dwell with us; he will be our God

and we will be his people. He will bring us to completion by his grace as we live lives of faith. So, don't touch the unclean things. Don't get polluted. Don't get sucked into an unholy life that will threaten your devotion to God.

How do you keep that from happening? The answer is in vs. 14; it says, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers." Don't associate yourself, don't commune with, don't become committed to those who don't know Christ. That's touching the unclean things; that's becoming polluted as he states in 2 Cor. 6. Righteousness and lawlessness don't mix; light and darkness don't have anything in common. Christ, our glorious redeemer can't partner with that worthless devil named Belial. One of the most impactful things to our faith is the associations we make. If you have helpful, God-honoring, Jesus-pursuing friendships you are more likely to honor God and pursue Jesus. But if your primary friends and companions in life care nothing for the things of God you're going to struggle in faith. Practically speaking, this means Christians should not become in close, interdependent associations with unbelievers. We live in this world with them. We absolutely will (and should) rub shoulders with people who don't know Jesus; we want to win them to Christ! We should love them and serve them in the name of Jesus. We should invite them into our homes; we should seek friendships with our neighbors. Yet, Paul is saying, we also need to avoid becoming yoked with them. Linking our lives, our values, our resources to those who don't know God in a way that would make us dependent on them.

There's all kinds of ways we might do this. Going into business with an unbeliever might be a good way to apply this text. You share a lot with a business partner; you clearly have an interdependent relationship with a business partner. You are yoked with them. So, what happens when they want to shave off the top? What happens if you disagree about ethical issues? That's a problem. Now, let's just say this, too. You might have those same problems with a supposed brother. And it might be the case that you that your unbelieving friend is trustworthy man or woman. It just goes to show how important it is to always practice discernment. But the principle that Paul is clarifying is that we should avoid interdependent relationships with those who don't know Jesus because we are more likely to be hindered in our devotion to the Lord.

I would argue that while 2 Cor. 6 isn't specifically mentioning marriage, it's probably its best application. What relationship is more significant or interdependent than the one between husband and wife? It's so important. So, unmarried people, be careful who you give your heart to so as to avoid marrying an unbeliever. Be careful about who you go on dates with. Maybe you're thinking, "It's just a date! I can't even go on a date with someone who doesn't believe in Jesus?" But that's where it begins, my dear friends. The infatuation, the enjoyment, the loyalty towards our significant others begins early with small seemingly insignificant steps or experiences and then it grows. And then all of the sudden, before we even know it, our heart is linked to another. Will you at that point, when you can't imagine your life without your boyfriend and offered an engagement ring say, "Well, I can't marry you because you don't believe in Jesus?" That's not going to happen. You're in love! When couples come to me to talk about getting married the decision is already made. They've already decided; we are getting married.

Couples don't come asking me if they should get married, just how soon we can make it happen. If I say at that point, "But you don't share a common faith," the believer of the two doesn't say, "You're right! Let's not." Honestly, they really don't want anybody throwing a wrench into their plans.

I would be an unhelpful, unfaithful pastor if I did not tell you things. And I hope you don't hear this word as harsh; I say it with love and care. And maybe it hits home; maybe you're in this situation; you are unequally yoked. I hope you are a cheerleader this morning saying, "Tell 'em, Brian! Our young people need to hear the truth." You're familiar with the struggle. I'm fighting for your faith this morning. I'm trying to spare you difficulty.

Some of you are there; you are married to an unbelieving spouse. What should you do? God reveals his way in 1 Peter 3 (READ vs. 1-6).

I think Peter has wives of unbelieving husbands primarily in mind in this passage. I believe that because of the way he frames his audience. Look at vs. 1, "Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives." First, some have husbands (and wives, of course) who do not obey the word. That's Peter's way of saying they don't believe in Christ. They are unsaved. They do not share faith with their spouses. How do we know that? Because he says he hopes they will be won. Won to what? Won to faith. That's the second piece of evidence that he's thinking primarily of wives married to unbelieving husbands. So, from the very inception of the church, 60 or 70 AD Peter was trying to help women married to unbelieving men. You are not alone.

What's Peter's primary word of instruction? Be subject to your husbands. What does that mean? And why would he tell wives to do that? You would think that if a husband doesn't obey Christ a wife should ignore him. My first observation for you is that he's not telling wives of unbelieving husbands to do anything different than he tells wives of believing husbands. Submit to your husbands; subject yourself to them. Now, I know those words aren't very popular today and they can be terribly misused, but what does Peter mean by them? Well, just look at some of the ways he describes what that means.

- Look at vs. 2; he calls that "respectful and pure conduct." Conduct means behavior or actions. Make sure your actions are respectful and pure.
- In vs. 4 he tells wives to have a gentle and quiet spirit. On the inside, you're not harsh or bitter; you also don't live a noisy, look-at-me life that makes unrealistic or unkind demands.
- In vs. 5-6 Peter uses Sarah as an example as it says she obeyed Abraham and she called him "lord." I'm not thinking that's going to happen later this afternoon in my home, but it signifies the respect a wife should give her husband. (Can I just say for the record, also, husbands absolutely should respect, serve, love and care for their wives, too. In fact, it seems clear to me that God calls a man to sacrifice the most in care of his wife.)

So, what is Peter doing? He's calling these wives married to unbelieving men to live exemplary lives in the Lord with respect to their husbands. This is an important command; do you know why? Because as we experience the frustrations and disappointments in our marital relationships, the first thing to go often times is good conduct. We are just so tempted to live tit-for-tat. I can tell you when I'm most likely to serve and treat Korby with generosity and kindness; it's when she's like that towards me. But when I think I've been wronged, when I think Korby isn't behaving properly in our relationship, the first thing to go is my kindness and good conduct to her. Why should I serve and be kind when she's not? I'm ashamed that I can feel that way sometimes and I'm spoiled. I have a sweet, kind, godly wife who treats me way better than I deserve. I can only imagine the challenge it is to be respectful, kind, loving, serving, patient, forgiving to a wife, to a husband who struggles to be those things to me because he or she doesn't have the Holy Spirit inside of them. So, hear these words today my dear struggling brothers or sisters and say, "I need this reminder; God help me be sweet and kind, caring and serving to my spouse not because they have earned it, but because Christ commands it and he's worth it."

And what might happen? They might be won. Peter has that as the goal. "Be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives." Notice what wins an unbelieving husband. It's not your words. We like to use our words, don't we? "When are you going to understand....? How long will it take you to see....? I know I've asked the last three months, but why don't you come to church with me today?" We are good at using our words. Most of the time, words don't win our spouses to Christ. Peter says the conduct of wives - pure and respectful conduct - might win a husband. It's not a guarantee, is it? We live by faith in the power of God. But it is our hope.

That's why Peter says in vs. 3, "Do not let your adorning be external - the braiding of hair, the wearing of gold, or the putting on of clothing - but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious." He's not saying wearing jewelry or nice clothing is wrong; he's saying the adorning that makes a real impact is in here. When our behavior is good and appropriate, when our disposition is kind and gentle, that's the apparel that makes an impact.

And I love how he finishes that verse because he reminds you, dear sisters who are walking this journey, that there is someone who does see you. Even if you have an unbelieving husband who doesn't see, who doesn't notice the changes you are making by the grace of God, your Father in Heaven sees. And that imperishable beauty of good conduct is very precious in the sight of God.

I pray that sounds like good news to you. Your God sees; your God notices. These steps of faith you are taking so that your husband can be won to Jesus are not in vain. God is watching and he loves what he sees. So keep remembering Jesus and his promises. For you to keep taking these difficult steps of faith, you need to be reminded over and over again of your great God's love for you, his promises for you and that he is constantly watching and seeing

what's happening. It's miraculous to keep taking these difficult steps of faith so keep turning back to the miracle-worker over and over again, the Lord Jesus Christ.

As you do, here are a few words of encouragement. First, don't isolate yourself and remain alone in your troubles and challenges. We all need others to encourage us to keep walking the journey of faith; when brothers tell me, "Brian, it's worth it!" I'm inspired to keep saying yes to faith and Jesus and no to selfishness and sin. Find others in a similar situation as you and share your lives together. Make seeking Christ the goal of your time together; refuse to complain or criticize your husbands or wives. If you're willing to give it time and are courageous and humble enough to be vulnerable I think you will find great help from the Lord from others in the same situation.

Second, don't stop praying. Ask God to help you live a life of good conduct at home. It's really hard sometimes so we need God's strength. Pray also for the salvation of your home. Pray that your spouse, pray that your children would be saved. Now, I don't know about you, but when I keep praying for things and it doesn't seem like anything is happening, I get discouraged and I start wondering if this really works. When that happens, go to God's word to remind yourself that prayer makes a real impact. Read James 5 to be reminded that the prayers of a righteous person are powerful. Remind yourself that Elijah was a man just like you and when he prayed fervently it didn't rain for 3.5 years. Remind yourself from Col. 1 to be watchful in prayer. Get your spyglass out and say, "Ok, God, I'm not going to stop looking for your grace." Don't stop praying.

We were back in Big Springs for Christmas. And when I was there I saw some of the women I made reference to earlier. And one particular woman stood out to me. The reason being was that her husband was in church with her. I thought that was great. Then later in the service I saw him get up because he was an usher that Sunday. Again, I thought "Cool!" He's coming and participating enough now that he's been asked to serve; and he said yes. Just that little picture gave me hope for better things. I don't know what's happening at home or in this man's heart, but I'm optimistic. I'm optimistic because I believe in a great and faithful God. And he uses the good conduct of wives to win over their unbelieving husbands. Why should we be surprised that it happens when our God says it's going to happen?

Key verse: 2 Cor. 7:1 ~ Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

#### Questions for the week

- What might be some differences between rightly having unbelieving friends and wrongly being "unequally yoked" with them?
- Are you familiar with the challenges of living or being raised in a home that doesn't share a common faith in Jesus? What are some challenges to that?
- How can the body of Christ help those struggling to live with an unbelieving spouse?