Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Separating from Unbelievers, Part 4
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 7:1
Code: 47-47

It's our joy this morning to conclude our series from 2 Corinthians chapter 6 verses 14 through chapter 7 verse 1. We are working our way through this monumental letter from the Apostle Paul to the Corinthian church because it has so much to say to us today in terms of our own Christian life and ministry.

And as we have embarked upon this particular paragraph we have come to grips with the matter of separating from unbelievers, that God has called to Him a holy people, namely the church. And as he say sin verse 14, "We are not to be bound together with unbelievers." We are a people holy unto the Lord, set apart, sanctified and separated.

We're going to complete this study this morning and we've already covered so many things but I do want to add to what we've already learned, things that I think are going to help us to see the strength and the importance of this issue. And by the way, a number of people have called me, written to me, spoken to me personally about how much this series has meant to them and how it has been practically applied to issues that they're dealing with in their life. I was just on the phone again last night counseling someone over this very issue of the relationship between believers and unbelievers in a spiritual enterprise, in a religious activity. It is an absolutely cornerstone foundational principle to understand in the Christian life and in the life of the church.

I want to give you a bit of historic perspective, if I can, this morning, and take you back behind the Corinthian text to let you know that God has always called His people to separate themselves completely from all forms of false religion. For the sake of their faithfulness, for the sake of their purity, for the sake of their usefulness, for the sake of their blessing, for the sake of God's own glory, for the sake of His name, for the sake of His truth, God has always called His people to separate themselves from false religion. False religion, of course, wrecks the faith of many. It eats destructively like spiritual gangrene. It has always had that effect and so God has always called His people to separation.

Satan always disguises himself as an angel of light, concocts religions which attempt to overthrow the purposes of God and confuse the people of God. That is always his ploy; past, present and future. And so God has always addressed the issue of His people staying away from satanic religion.

Let's go back in to the Pentateuch and see how it all kind of got started when God was first identifying His people Israel. If you go back to the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth of the books of Moses that make up the law or the Pentateuch, and turn to chapter 7, we get a very good insight into this matter of separation from false religion.

In Deuteronomy chapter 7 we read this, "When the Lord your God...verse 1...shall bring you into the land where you are entering to possess it," that is into the land of Canaan, the land of Israel, "and shall clear away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Gergashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you." When you go into the land and the Lord clears the way for you by defeating these peoples who are greater and stronger than you. Verse 2, "And when the Lord your God shall deliver them before you and you shall defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them." Now that's a very, very direct command to kill them. He's calling, in a word, for a form of genocide, wipe them out, block them out, exterminate them.

It is just such a strong command that makes liberal theologians quiver and conclude that obviously this is not a true representation of God because God is love and God would never make such an order, let alone carry it out. How are we to understand that God says, "Exterminate these nations?" Well the command can only be reconciled with the patient and gracious and loving character of God, all of which are true about Him, if you understand some things. If you understand, for example, the enormous wickedness of these people, if you understand the enormity of their idolatry, if you understand the severity of their blasphemy of God, if you understand that that is an idolatry so gross and so deadly and so incorrigible and so hopeless and so without repentance that it has the potential to devastatingly effect God's purposes...then you can understand why God called for their extermination.

The New Testament says, "Evil company corrupts good morals." Having the children of God live side by side with these blasphemous, incorrigible, wicked, unrepentant idolaters whose crimes had reached to His nostrils day after day could only end in the corruption of God's people. God could not preserve His people if they entered associations with such idolatrous nations. And God knew that they had reached past the point of grace, repentance was past, not on the horizon. They were fixed in their impenitence. They were resolute. They were therefore hopeless. And God was not going to allow the cancer of their blasphemy to totally debilitate His own eternal purposes. And so He called for their destruction.

Following that up in verse 2 He elucidates, "You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them." No alliances, and no compromises, you deal drastically, dramatically and finally with them. Verse 3, "Furthermore you shall not intermarry with them, you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons." We asked the question a couple of weeks ago...does it mean when it says "do not be bound together with unbelievers, do not be unequally

yoked with unbelievers," that Christians shouldn't marry non-Christians? Well certainly that is true. Christians should not marry non-Christians, that is being unequally yoked because marriage is a spiritual relationship. But if you're looking for something more specific, here it is. Here is a prohibition against the people of God intermarrying with people who are not His people.

Why? Verse 4, any covenant, any alliance, any compromise, any intermarriage will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods. Just as we saw with no less a strong and wise and blessed man than Solomon. "They will turn away your sons from following Me to serve other gods and then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you."

There is a lot at stake here. You cannot afford a compromise. You must exterminate those people or they will devastatingly influence you. You cannot co-mingle with them. It can't be done without tragic results. Verse 5, "But thus you shall do to them, you shall tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and hue down their Asherim," that's places and pieces of their worship, "and burn their graven images with fire." Interesting. Remove their temples, smash them to the ground, cut down their altars, destroy anything and everything that has been any part of the abominable religion they practiced. You must do that. It's like getting rid of a deadly virus, you have to kill it at every location, you have to wipe out every vestige of it because the risk of spiritual contamination is so high.

We hear about the potential deadly viruses that could arise in our world like the HIV virus and other viruses that from time to time we hear break out in certain parts of the world as we recently did about a virus that was so deadly in the land of Africa, the horizon of human history as we look out against it may yield many more such viruses and they may have such devastating effect as we've never dreamed in the future as they often have in the past, we're very much aware of that. But a far more severe virus than any that destroys the body is that which attacks the spiritual dimension, and that is the virus of Satanic false religious system.

This passage, by the way, became a mandate for the Scottish Reformers. I've been reading a lot lately about John Knox. We think of John Knox, of course, as the great preacher who really was the driving force in the founding of Scottish Presbyterianism. And to this day when you preach in Scotland, the pulpit in the Church of Scotland is called "The John Knox Pulpit." We think of John Knox as a great reformer, a great preacher of the gospel. He was a very aggressive man, almost a warring man. John Knox assaulted false religion with a vengeance. In fact, the Scottish Reformers went after all the edifices, all of the buildings that remained of the terrible Romish cult. And they smashed them all, much to the dismay of the lovers of architecture who were trying to preserve the architectural images. But the maxim of John Knox was right. John Knox said, "Pull down the nests and the birds will disappear."

Well here you have a very similar situation. This particular people of God, the nation Israel, into the land of God are given this direct mandate from God. I hasten to add, I don't think we can go around

smashing the buildings of false religions without such a divine mandate. And as well intentioned as the Scottish Reformers may have been, they might have overstepped their bounds. But certainly there's no question about it here in Deuteronomy and there's no question about the intent of the Scottish Reformers to preserve the influence...to preserve their people from the influence of false religion. It's all around us and we need to come and be separate from it.

God gives the reason in verse 6, "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God." The word "holy" means separate, sanctified, set apart. "You are a holy people to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. You are separate from them. He called you out. You are His own possession. You belong to no other person and no other deity."

And so, very early in God's redemptive revelation it becomes abundantly clear that the people of God are to make sure they have no alliances and no covenants and no interchange with false religion. Taking it from a collective perspective there in Deuteronomy 7 to a personal one, turn to Daniel chapter 1. And here we look not at a group of people so much as individuals. We meet four young men.

Familiar to us and to anyone who knows the stories of the Bible are Daniel and his three friends...Mishael, Hananiah and Azariah, that being their Jewish names. We find here a very similar situation. Daniel 1 verse 1, "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand." Notice please that the Lord allowed the Babylonians to win because the Babylonian captivity was punishment for Israel's apostasy. So God was, in this case, on the side of the Babylonians, at least for 70 years before they were released back to the land...actually longer than that from the deportation.

So here comes Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon to Jerusalem, besieges it, wins the victory. "And some of the vessels of the house of God he takes, brought them to the land of Shinar, the land of Babylon, to the house of his god and brought the vessels into the treasury of his god." So they plundered the temple full of all kinds of gold and hauled it all back to Babylon and put it in the temple of his own deity. He didn't have any...any trouble mingling deities, he didn't have any trouble mingling worship. As we noted in our studies earlier on this same subject, God has a lot of trouble with that. You don't take an idol into the temple of God and you don't take God into an idol temple. As we saw in the case of 1 Samuel 4 through 6 and the case of Ezekiel chapter 8. But obviously Nebuchadnezzar didn't have a problem with that, he had many gods and throwing more vessels from another deity into the temple wouldn't make a difference.

So there is the plundering of Jerusalem. In this particular situation there was an initial deportation. That is they took people captive, Jewish people captive, back to the land of Babylon. They wanted to

maintain the land of Israel as a vassal state, they wanted Israel to be productive economically and so they wanted to leave some people there who could continue to function in the land so that it could increase the wealth and prosperity of Babylon working in their behalf.

The first deportation is described in verses 3 and 4. "The king ordered Ashpenaz the chief of his officials to bring in some of the sons of Israel," that's the first deportation, 606 or so, including...B.C...."including some of the royal family and of the nobles, youths in whom was no defect who were good looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding, discerning knowledge, who had the ability for serving in the king's court and he ordered them...ordered him, that is Ashpenaz, to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans."

Now here was basically the plan of Nebuchadnezzar. He attacked Jerusalem, the problem was his first shot, 606, he got word that Nabopolassar, his father, had died. And so right at the very beginning of his campaign he had to go back to Babylon because of the death of his father. Treks like that were not easy and it was a major move. When he went back he had to change his plan, not having time to set up his own government there he decided to leave the Jewish king, Jehoiakim, in power. But basically to strip him of everybody around him and of any hope for future power. And so he took some of the royal family and some of the nobles. No doubt they were hostages. He probably threatened Johoiakim if he didn't do what he wanted him to do, he'd kill his own family and his own nobles. And he had taken the best of them, described in verse 4, the best looking, the smartest, the most wise, the most discerning who had the kind of ability that could be used in the highest levels of government in that land. He didn't have time, as I said, to set up his own operation in Judah, so he wanted leverage against the king so that the king would do what he wanted him to do.

But he also had another plan in mind. He took the elite leaders of the nation, all the young men who were gifted and capable, and he took them in order that he might brainwash them in Chaldean culture because he needed somebody to administer Jewish affairs. Now he's got a pile of Jewish people being deported out of Israel into his own land, there's three deportations going to take place, the last one in 586 B.C., three major deportation of Jewish people. These Jewish people could constitute a reactionary revolutionary terrorist group in the middle of Babylon if they weren't controlled. And so the idea was get the best young men, train the best young men and use them to administer Jewish affairs. They will understand the Jews. They'll understand how they think and how they operate. But they will buy in to the Chaldean culture. So the brainwashing process was what he was after and he wanted to brainwash the very best. Then when the time came they could remove Jehoiakim, send somebody back who was a Jew but had been brainwashed effectively in Chaldean culture, as well has having young men to administer affairs right there in Babylon over the Jewish people. He wanted only the best, only those who were the cream of the crop. And indeed they picked those very young men.

Now you will notice at the end of verse 4 that the idea was to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. What that boils down to is theology because the literature of the Chaldeans was theology. You cannot separate their culture from their religion. Their religion was their culture. Their culture was simply made up of magic, sorcery, enchantments, omens, prayers, hymns to their deities, a multiplicity of deities, all kinds of legends about the deities, a very complex theology utterly alien to the truth and alien to the true God. They wanted these youths, believe me, to forget Jehovah, to forget the true and living God and to worship the Babylonian trinity of Anu, Enlil, and Ea. And so they began to teach them theology. This was a three-year training program as you will note a little later in the chapter, a three-year reprogramming, a three-year brainwashing process.

Further, verse 5, they wanted to alter not only their theology but as a part of this brainwashing to alter their life style and suck them right in to pagan worship. "The king appointed to them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank and appointed that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal service." Now remember, these...these young men are from the royal family and they are the nobles of Israel. So fancy food wasn't anything new. They had probably been living in and around the palace in Jerusalem which was extremely prosperous. Now remember, before the destruction of this temple it was the Solomonic temple and it was a somewhat wealthy nation and a prosperous nation. Those indications are given even in the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah who prophesied the captivity to come, but there are still notes about the wealth and prosperity of the nation. So these young men weren't particularly enamored, surely, with having good food and good wine, that would have been available to them in the past. The issue here is that they would be literally engaging in idol feasts because as we found with the Corinthians, the food and drink at the idol feasts was part of the celebration of their religious services. And so this food which came from the king would be food dedicated to the deities. The king's choice food and wine would be a part of some feast to the deities and they would literally be engaged in eating that in that kind of context. Not that there was anything wrong with the food because of that, but they would be indulging themselves, to put it in Paul's terms, "in the tables of demons."

So verse 8 says, "Daniel sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself." Daniel knew that he couldn't allow himself to get sucked in to this pagan life style, this religious life style.

Well there was more, go back to verse 6, they did another very wise thing, they tried to change the people's identity, change their theology, change their form of worship and change their identity. There were four young men, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The commander of the officials assigned new names to them, to Daniel which means "God is judge"...magnificent name...God is judge...he assigned the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah, which means the Lord is gracious in Hebrew, he gave the name of Shadrach, associated with the term "Aku(?)" or "Marduk)," one of the

idols of Babylon. To Mishael, a beautiful name, it really is a question, it means: who is like the Lord? Or literally, who is what the Lord is. They give him the name Meshach, which means who is what Aku is, and Aku was the moon god. And to Azariah, which means "the Lord is my help," they gave the name Abed-nego, servant of Nebo who was the god of wisdom and education.

So the brainwashing was pretty comprehensive...changed their theology, change their life style, get them involved in idol festivals, change their names so that every time you speak to them, every time they have to identify themselves they identify themselves with our gods and we will wean them away from the true God.

Verse 8, "But Daniel made up his mind, he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself." He still was granted by God in verse 9 favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials. But he would not defile himself. Not to defile himself, the word "defile" comes from gaalin Hebrew, it means to stain or pollute. He wanted to do everything to avoid this compromise, everything to disconnect himself from false religious activity. He would worship only the true God. And the one thing that stood out was the food because it constituted the engagement of an idol feast and he would not do it and neither would his friends. And God honored them and when the time of the three years passed, they were in better health and better intellect than everybody else. God blessed them for their non-compromising spirit...spirit of preserving the truth.

Eventually it got costly and Daniel ended up in a lion's den and Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael ended up in a fiery furnace. Satan will always try to pollute the true religion by sucking God's people into unholy alliances with false religion. We must completely separate from all forms of false religion.

I had a letter on my desk this morning when I went up there from someone representing the Roman Catholic Church asking me if I would be willing to engage myself in a public debate with theologians from that system because they have been listening to me and they know I have some grievance and they'd like to debate them publicly. In my own mind I even see that as a form of compromise because I will be drawing people who come to hear me into the exposure of the subtlest of their ideologies by their most able defenders. I don't want to do that and I'll tell them so. I don't want to do anything that allows Satan to gain a foothold in confusing anybody.

I go back to my college days, I had a good friend in college and we played on the baseball team in our university days together. We were good buddies because we were both involved in Christian ministry, we did a lot of work with Youth For Christ and with young people and we had some great times together, traveling as players and students. We both had felt the call of God to the ministry. I went away to Talbot Seminary to study under Dr. Charles Fineberg who became my mentor in my seminary days. I had the privilege and joy of speaking at his funeral on Friday, he went to be with the Lord this last week at 86. And I went away and he left his imprint on my life. I was rehearsing to the

people at the funeral the imprint that he left on my life, it is huge. And in great measure I am what I am today in God's service because of him.

My friend went to a liberal seminary. We parted ways. Three years later I came out an expositor of the Word, he came out a bartender. His entire faith was devastated. Everything was unscrewed and unnailed and flying free in a vacuum into chaos and confusion. I've seen it happen over and over and over and over. Such compromises are deadly to the truth, they take the conviction out of people.

There was a very pronounced and well thought of and respected theologian in this area of Southern California who wrote some formidable books defending the Christian faith, who got himself involved in studying theological error and eventually became so confused he killed himself. It happens. We have to keep separated from that. And we'll need to be reminding ourselves all the time of that because Satan is so subtle to encroach upon us.

Well, it is this very issue that we see in Deuteronomy and in Daniel that we now turn to in 2 Corinthians. I know that was a long introduction but I have a short sermon.

The Corinthians were doing just this, they were going to the table of the Lord and going to the table of demons. They were going and engaging themselves with a prostitute in the temple of Aphrodite. They were going to festivals and ceremonies and celebrations and then coming to the Lord's table, coming to the church and they were even inviting false teachers into the church and listening to them and believing them. And such alliances are blasphemous and so Paul says in verse 14, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers," and he's talking here about in any spiritual enterprise whatsoever. As we noted for you in 2 Timothy chapter 2, that stuff eats like gangrene. You cannot expose yourself to that without devastating effect. In 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul said to Timothy, "Present yourself approved to God, a workman who doesn't need to be ashamed, handling accurately the Word of truth." That's your job, handle accurately the Word of truth. And then he immediately says, "Avoid worldly and empty talk that leads to ungodliness, talk that spreads like gangrene among whom are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth and they upset the faith of some."

They are the dishonorable garbage pails that he talks about as vessels of dishonor. Only when you cleanse yourself from associations with them can you be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful to the master, prepared for every good work. And then he goes on and says, "Flee youthful lusts, but first flee false teachers, false religion." Don't sit in some place and expose yourself to error. Satan is too subtle for that. He will outwit you and steal your strength.

That's the command, do not be bound together with unbelievers. Five reasons...reason number one we saw, it is irrational. In verses 14 and 15 he says, "Common sense tells you righteousness and lawlessness have no partnership. What fellowship has light with darkness? What harmony has

Christ with Belial, or Satan? What has a believer in common with an unbeliever?" Nothing. It's...it's...it's irrational to make such alliance. Secondly, it's sacrilegious. Verse 16, "What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God, just as God said, I will dwell in them and walk among them, I will be their God and they shall be My people." We are God's temple. God lives in us. God walks in us. We are His and He is ours. It is sacrilegious to engage ourselves with idols, with false religion, with demon worship. To mingle is a form of blasphemy.

Thirdly, it is disobedient. Verse 17, "Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate, says the Lord. And do not touch what is unclean." This is a divine mandate and it's the same one that's given back in Isaiah 52:11 and it's repeated here. The Lord says separate. This is from the Lord. Paul

says, "I'm telling you this but I'm also saying the Lord is telling you this, you are called to obey this command." And not to separate from unbelievers is irrational, sacrilegious and disobedient.

Fourthly, it is unprofitable because if you do separate, end of verse 17, God says I will welcome you and I will be a Father to you and you shall be sons and daughters to Me, says the Lord Almighty. Not to do that is to cut yourself off from the blessing of being a child of God. There is great blessing, there is immense reward for the Christian who does not compromise. God is our Father and we are His children. And we must repudiate all contaminating religious and spiritual alliances with darkness, lawlessness, sin and Satan, or we will forfeit the joys of obedient fellowship. And I'll even go a step further, someone who continually engages in such alliances may be in fact revealing that they are after all not even a child of God. And that they have never really been delivered from their sins. But surely those of us who have understand that if we are the children of God, then we must conduct ourselves as His children, holy, separated unto Him.

So, not to obey this command is in every sense foolish. It is irrational, it is sacrilegious, it is disobedient, it is unprofitable. Last point, it is ungrateful...it is ungrateful. Verse 1, this is a poor chapter break, you ought to just take that statement "chapter 7" and put it after verse 1. Verse 1 says, "Therefore having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." This is a great verse. You could take this verse and preach for six months on the doctrine of progressive sanctification...I'm not going to do that. But there's so much here in seed form that could blossom into fullness. But let me just keep it in its context.

Paul is giving us the final motive for obeying the command, the final motive for separating from unbelievers in religious association. And the final one is clearly because of God's promises, therefore...logical inference, a consequence of all that has just been said...therefore, having these promises let us cleanse ourselves.

In other words, he's not appealing to command here, he's appealing to promise. There are commands, he appealed to them earlier, verse 14, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers." Verse 17, "Come out from their midst and be separate and do not touch what is unclean." And we are to obey those commands out of a healthy regard for God's chastening if we don't.

But he goes beyond commands to promises, "having these promises, beloved." Promises then become the final motive. Promises should elicit love, gratitude, thankfulness. We should be so overwhelmed at such generosity, such gracious privilege, such mercy, such grand blessing. I mean, when we read that we are the temple of the living God and God says, "I will dwell in them and walk among them and I will be their God and they shall be My people," and when God says, "I will welcome you, I will be a Father to you and you shall be sons and daughters to Me," those are the promises of which he speaks...having these promises that God will dwell in us, walk in us, be our God and we'll be His people, that God will embrace us and be our Father and we will be His children.

There are seven separate statements in those two verses, verse 16 and 18, that speak of promise. When we understand those promises, beloved, how can we do less than cleanse ourselves from all defilement? It's an appeal to goodness, God's goodness, mercy.

It is no different, really, than that most notable and familiar of all such appeals in Romans 12 where Paul says, "I urge you to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice." He's calling for separation, too. "Holy" means separate, acceptable to God, do not be conformed to the world, you're coming away from the world, you're coming out of the system, you're transformed by the renewing of your mind, you present yourself as a separate sacrifice acceptable to God and you do all that and I urge you to do it and what basis? "I urge you therefore, by the mercies of God." By the mercies of God I plead with you, by the mercies of God. What are the mercies of God? All the merciful things that He provides to the sinner in salvation, everything Paul was talking about in the first eleven chapters of Romans. On the basis of God's sovereign love, His predestinating purpose, on the basis of God's gospel call, on the basis of justification, on the basis of God's regeneration in your life, on the basis of God having granted you the Holy Spirit and giving you an inheritance with the saints so that you're a joint heir with Jesus Christ on the basis of God's gift, or the promise of heaven, eternal life, the hope of eternal life, assurance, on the basis of all of that, all those mercies, mercy meaning you don't deserve any of them...on the basis of all of that, can't you at least live a separated life? If you can't, it is blatant ingratitude.

Listen to what Peter says because Peter makes the same appeal. This is one of my favorite portions of Scripture, 2

Peter 1:3, "Seeing that His divine power...God's divine power...has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness." I just cherish that statement. "He has granted to us everything

pertaining to life and godliness through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. By these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust."

Here is God, through our knowledge of Jesus Christ by God's own glory and excellence, He has given to us precious and magnificent promises in the gospel that have made us partakers of the divine nature and have caused us to escape the corruption that is in the world, God has been so merciful and so gracious. Now, for this very reason, he says in verse 5, "Apply all diligence in your faith and supply moral excellence." Start to live the life, he says. When you've received all these magnificent promises how can you do less than respond in obedience?

That's exactly what we have in this text of 2 Corinthians. Let's go back to it. He couldn't say it any more directly than he said it. "Having these promises, beloved." "Beloved" is a term of endearment from Paul to the people but it also sets the boundaries for who's in on these promises, only the beloved of God, only those accepted in the beloved, who is Christ. Paul likes to use that phrase, he used it twice...or that term, he used it twice in 1 Corinthians, twice in 2 Corinthians to refer to the believers. It is an expression of tender affection, but it is also a way to set the limits on the promises. Those of us who are the beloved, who have received the promises, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. How can we do anything less than do that out of sheer gratitude. The fact that we are given such amazing mercies, such amazing promises should be so compelling that we can only respond with gratitude.

And by the way, God hates ingratitude. One of the things that God hates is a thankless heart. In Romans chapter 1:21 God judges men because they did not honor Him as God. His wrath is poured out on them because they were not thankful. God will condemn to judgment unbelievers for ingratitude. That is to say the ingratitude of an unbeliever offends God. How much more would the ingratitude of a believer offend Him? For whom He has given all things pertaining to life and godliness...an ungrateful Christian has to be the worst possible of all those who stand before God in His grace. There are a lot of sins that God must rank less noxious than ingratitude, to the One who has given us so much.

In Colossians 2:7 the Apostle Paul expresses that we should be overflowing with gratitude. And what does that gratitude mean? A negative and a positive. The appropriate act of gratitude is spelled out in a negative and a positive. The negative, "Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit." Let us cleanse ourselves. We have to do it. Oh of course, the cleansing work is God's work, but it doesn't happen apart from us. It's like Philippians 2, "Work out your own salvation for it is God who is at work in you to will and to do of His own good pleasure." God is working it in but we have to work it out, it calls for our response. We must act to avoid any ingratitude and desecration of God's temple.

And notice the word "defilement," very important, it's the only time it's ever used in the New Testament. It is a special word for defilement, it is the word molusmos. Three times it is used in the Septuagint. Whenever it is used it always refers to religious defilement, not just the defilement of immorality or lying or cheating or coveting, but religious defilement such as idols, idol feasts, temple prostitutes, sacrifices, festivals of worship. It's a religious defilement. "Let us cleanse ourselves from all religious defilement," all unholy alliances with false religion, with error, with heresy.

And then he says, "Of flesh and spirit." Just a word about that. In one sense it could simply be a way to say "completely." It could be a way to say "inwardly and outwardly." But I think there's more to it than that. I think he is saying there that false teaching, false religion can defile the flesh by pandering to the human appetites. It can do that. I think about Mormonism in its early days. Mormonism grew largely because of its perverted sexual perspective. It offered polygamy. That's a great way to draw a crowd of lustful men into your religion, isn't it? And, of course, Mormonism promises that the epitome is when you die, and if you've lived a proper Mormon life and gone through the proper Mormon hoops, some day you will occupy your personal planet, you and your eternal spouse will engage in celestial sex forever. That's the roots of Mormonism and that's how they sold the system early on.

It's not different than any of those ancient forms of religion with temple priestesses who acted as prostitutes. There are forms of religion that pander to the flesh, forms of false religion, whether it defiles the body or not, some do, historically many have. So some Christian might say, for example in the Corinthian church, "Look, I go over there because, you know, my mother-in-law wants me to come, trying to keep my marriage together. My whole family is engaged in that. I'm a new Christian, I'd like to be able to win them. I go but I don't...I don't get over there where the prosti...prostitutes are and I...I'm really laying off the drinking, I don't even get drunk, I don't do any of that stuff, I just go because it's...you know, it's good and I don't want to eat the food because I don't want to engage in the idol deal, so, you know, I have a sack lunch. So I'm really toeing the mark, I'm just there."

That's a nice thought but the fact is that false religion defiles flesh and spirit, it reaches behind just the human appetites into the mind and it defiles understanding and thinking and truth. And even if a Christian might avoid the contamination of the fleshly sins when attending false worship, such as drunkenness, sex, gluttony, or whatever, he cannot afford to expose his mind to Satan's lies because where his body might escape the immediate pollution, his mind will be contaminated and polluted by the devilish ideologies and blasphemies that assault the purity of divine truth and blaspheme God's name.

So he says, "Cleanse ourselves from all that." And here's the positive, "Perfecting holiness in the fear of God." Perfecting, epiteleo, teleomeans to finish, Jesus used that word when He said, "It is finished," on the cross. Epiteleomeans to really finish, compound verb, not just start but complete. What he is saying is pursue the end of holiness with a proper reverence for God. Pursue holiness.

What is holiness? It is separation, pursue that separation from all that defiles both your body and your mind. Pursue holiness, pursue Christ who is the perfection of holiness in bodily form. That's what Paul meant when he said, "I pursue the goal of the prize of the upward call," what's the prize of the upward call? What are we going to get when we get called up? Christ's likeness, that's what I pursue. I pursue the holiness of Christ. Romans 8, we were predestined to be conformed to His image, Christ's image. First John 3, "Some day we'll be like Him." That is our pursuit. We pursue Christ's likeness, we pursue His holiness.

Why? In the fear of God. That's our motive. Reverence for God, adoration. It doesn't mean that we're frightened of God, it means that we have a holy and healthy respect for Him. And we know He is a holy God and if we belong to Him we need to be a holy people. Go back to Leviticus 20, 21, 22, "I am the Lord your God...I am the Lord your God...I am the Lord your God...I am the Lord your God..." He says it over and over and over and over and over. And that is why you must obey, you must obey, you must obey, you must separate, you must be pure, you must be holy because I am the Lord your God. If you identify with Me, you identify with holiness. If you respect Me, if you honor Me, if you love Me, you will pursue holiness.

Matthew 5:48, "Therefore you are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Pursue that perfection. Pursue that virtue. Pursue that holiness which is true of God and manifest in Jesus Christ. Leviticus 20:26 says, "Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine." Chapter 21 He says, "I the Lord who sanctifies you am holy, you be holy," and goes on and on that way. It's out of respect for God. It's out of awe and reverence for Him. As an act of grateful worship we pursue holiness.

So the final point, disobedience to this command is an act of ingratitude, it is being ungrateful. We don't want to be that because God has poured out such magnificent promises then we cleanse ourselves from all such defilement, all such religious defilement, we separate ourselves completely and we pursue that separation which is characteristic of God who is utterly separate from evil and all false teaching and we pursue that perfection of God manifest in the Lord Jesus Christ who was separate from sinners, holy, harmless and undefiled. And we do that out of reverence for God who has been so gracious to us. Let's bow in prayer.

We remember the words of Proverbs, our Father, where the writer says "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Wisdom starts when we honor You. No matter what else we may know we are fools if we do not honor You. And we would honor You with hearts of gratitude for the precious promises, magnificent promises that You have given us, that You will be in us and walk in us and You will be our God and we will be Your people, that You will embrace us, welcoming and receiving us, You will be our Father and we will be Your sons and daughters. O Father, thank you that all that is reality in Christ and because of those precious promises we would cleanse ourselves from all defilement and we would pursue a holy separation from all that dishonors You and defiles us. Thank

You for such a clear and straightforward word from the Scripture, for the affirmation of its truth. And now, Lord, help us by Your Holy Spirit to make application in those areas of life where we're called to respond in obedience.

At the same time, Lord, give us such a heart for the people caught in evil systems. May we snatch them as we would snatch a bran from the burning, not getting too close, just close enough to reach out with the gospel and snatch them away, fearing for our ownselves lest we be singed if we remained too close. And, Lord, we know that You will honor our faithfulness as we endeavor to live this out for the glory of Your Son. Amen.

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