

Unequally Yoked

Genesis 2:24 – This passage describes the essential ingredients for cohesiveness in marriage.

- Leave: This is describing total allegiance to each other. Your spouse is before any family.
- Hold fast: This is describing an unwavering commitment. There is no exit option.
- One flesh: The one flesh relationship describes...
 - Spiritual Oneness: Growing together in love for Christ.
 - Physical Oneness: An exclusive, intimate commitment. No other options.
 - Emotional Oneness: Commitment to exclusive feelings. No emotional affairs.
 - Missional Oneness: Going the same direction at the same time for the same reasons, not independent people sharing an address, but going different places.

God's instruction on marriage is clear. The failure to follow it takes a couple on a rocky ride; the "unequal yoke" will cause problems down the road. Amos 3:3 – you might be walking together right now, but will that continue if you are eventually walking to different destinations?

2 Corinthians 6:14-15 – To be "yoked" with someone means you're involved in a covenantal or contractual relationship. Paul is drawing upon the Old Testament prohibition of yoking two different kinds of animals like an ox and a donkey (Deuteronomy 22:10). Because the animals were incompatible, the mixed yoke was unfair to both of them. Paul is warning believers against forming binding relationships with unbelievers that would hinder them from maintaining godly values or a solid Christian witness. This text does not mention marriage specifically, and it is much broader in scope than that, but this command most certainly would include it.

My heart goes out to Christians married to unbelievers. They can never be fully agreed, since one partner has Christ living within and the other does not. Sometimes Christians arrive at this mixed situation because they trusted Christ after they married. If they will faithfully obey God's marriage instructions, they may lead their mates to the Savior. Still, to pursue this relationship before one has entered into it is unwise. Notice the words employed in this passage to describe the incompatibility of such a union.

(1) Partnership refers to fellowship, sharing, and participation. A forgiven person and an unforgiven person might be able to share life, love, children, and other physical and relational realities. However, the most important reality is something they cannot share. They cannot share in the life of Christ, in the Word of God with the people of God on a spiritual level. And to a Christian, all of our other relationships and realities revolve around that relationship and reality.

(2) Fellowship refers to communion. It is like "partnership", but it is more personal, involving the sharing of ourselves. But the intimate association between light and darkness doesn't exist; they are incompatible. The believer is "full of light" while the unbeliever is "full of darkness" (cf. Ephesians 5:7-8), and harmony on the deepest level is impossible.

(3) Accord refers to agreement. It is where we get our English word "symphony." A partner who belongs to Christ and one who does not cannot make sweet music together. They may think they will be able to, and in some ways they may, but in the most important way God says they will produce dissonance and discord. It doesn't play a consistent tune (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:8).

(4) Portion refers to a share, a part, or stock, like contracting parties hold in agreement. The two parties may hold stock by virtue of marriage, but the potential for full agreement and complete harmony simply does not exist between believers and unbelievers.

Intending to marry an unbeliever is unfair to them. Your partner thinks your heart belongs exclusively to them, but it does not. You share your love with Christ. In a Christian marriage, this sharing draws the husband and wife closer to each other, but not in a mixed marriage. Your love for Christ and your love for your unsaved mate will often conflict, resulting in turmoil and strife. You will be subjecting the one you claim to love to that kind of unpleasantness. Marital adjustments are difficult enough without amplifying them by an obstacle of this magnitude.

Intending to marry an unbeliever is unfair to you. Such mixed marriages are forbidden all the way through the Bible (cf. Deuteronomy 7:3-4). God says that the unbeliever may turn the believer's heart away from the Lord. If that happens, for God to bring you back to the satisfaction of His fellowship, you may undergo many trials until you yield yourself totally to the Lord. While this is happening your unsaved mate will probably be unhappy about it.

Intending to marry an unbeliever is unfair to God. To give yourself instead to someone who does not belong to Christ is not fair to the God who saved you. God established Christian marriage as a beautiful picture of the relationship that exists between Christ and His church. The better your marriage pictures that divine union, the better will be your Christian witness to a lost world. Since marriage with an unbeliever caricatures this divine picture, you will mar your testimony by entering this kind of mixed relationship. This is grossly unfair to God.

Maybe you're saying, "But I'll win my mate to Christ after the wedding." God isn't asking people to enter into marriage like a mission field. Occasionally an unsaved partner is won to Christ, but the overwhelming odds are against you. The tension produced by your willful disobedience to God's command will not be conducive to effective evangelism.

Having said all that...It could be that the "status of being unequally yoked" is not inherently sinful in and of itself, since Paul instructs Christians married to non-believers not to leave their spouses (1 Corinthians 7:12-13). Also, the Apostle Peter says that the unbelieving husband may in some cases be won to Christ by the godly and respectful behavior of the wife (1 Peter 3:1-2).

However, both Paul and Peter are speaking of cases that are "after the fact". The person who is "unequally yoked" is in the midst of an already involved situation, it is not an excuse to enter into a situation. So although we have instructions for those who were already unequally yoked, we're taught not to seek out unequally yoked situations. For example, Paul also tells widows they may be remarried, but only "in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:39).

So being unequally yoked is not necessarily something God finds abhorrent at face value, it depends on the particular dynamics, unlike many other sins. Paul's command to not be unequally yoked is not just about "here's something sinful you shouldn't do" and it also about "here's something you shouldn't do if you want your marriage to be all it can be, and avoid a lot of strife and conflict." In marriage, the closest of relationships, you should bind yourself only to one who shares your Christian values. That mismatched team won't work on a spiritual level. And

marriage is not just about love between two people. For the Christian, it is about a picture of the love of God, who sent Jesus Christ to redeem a people, and it is a display of that grace. You cannot expect an unbeliever to understand that and to live it out.

Staying true to God and still respecting your spouse can be much more difficult in the midst of such an “unequally yoked” relationship (1 Corinthians 15:33). You cannot change the spiritual reality. If you are yoked in a romantic relationship with an unbeliever, the idolatry of their heart and the faithlessness of their worldview will inevitably become a stumbling block for you. We do not like to think of someone we love as being “bad company”, or “evil”, but anything that draws you away from a whole hearted pursuit of Christ will have an adverse effect on your life. They may love you dearly, their intentions may not be evil, and their lifestyle may not appear evil, but if their faith is not in Christ then their effect on you will be adversarial in some sense.

In the case of a couple who are living together in a semi-committed state (i.e. sexually intimate only with each other), and especially when they have children, and one partner becomes a believer, marriage seems like the appropriate response. If for no other reason than that believer has an obligation to loving, raising and providing for those offspring, and separating makes that vastly more difficult. However, if the non-believing partner is adamantly against marriage, then separation seems like the only option. For the unbeliever who is willing to marry, D.A. Carson has suggested that the believing partner needn't insist on a “church marriage”, as long as the couple marries according to whatever the larger (secular) cultural norms regarding marriage.

Jesus, in talking with the Samaritan woman commented on her being with five husbands and the man she was currently living with was NOT her husband. In Christ's eyes, there was a difference between being married and simply living together with sexual intimacy. So yes, there is definitely a difference between being married and living together with sexual intimacy. But the question that is raised is not, “Should they just be treated as though they are already married and marriage becomes merely a formality,” but “has their relationship placed them in a position where they are actually obligated to BE married and marriage has become a necessity?”

Sometimes we approach sexuality and marriage as though the only relationship between them is that you shouldn't have sex without being married. And that's true, of course, but I think there's another relationship: you should be married to people if you have sex with them. It seems like that's actually the big part of “what's wrong with” fornication – you're supposed to be married if you have sex with someone, so if you go around having sex with people and not either being married to or marrying them, you are defrauding them of the marriage to which they are entitled. Of course, having sex before marriage is wrong in itself, but it's not just that it's a no-no in some technical sense – it's that it sets up an obligation to the other person, which the fornicator then goes on to violate immediately and by definition.

Paul's problem isn't with “being” unequally yoked if you find yourself in that position “after the fact” (you got saved while in the relationship). The problem is with seeking out and forming a relationship that puts you in that position in the first place. However, once the relationship is already there, and there are the other things that belong to marriage in place (not just the sex, but such as children), it's not a matter of what “should have happened” X number of years ago, but what should happen now, what is going to happen today and soon after that.