

***Question: The Bible says that believing Christians should not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.***

***Does this mean Christians should live totally separate from those who do not have the same beliefs?***

The early Christians lived in a pagan world of idolatry and immorality that challenged their way of life as followers of Jesus. There were times when they needed to separate themselves from these seductive influences. Christians today do not face the same form of idolatry as their early predecessors, but they do face a world that often challenges them to compromise a godly life. That is why the apostle Paul wrote: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? . . . What portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? . . . Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord” (2 Cor. 6:14-18 ESV). But this statement taken by itself leads to some important questions. Should Christians be married to non-believers? Can Christians have any kind of association with non-Christians? Should believers in Christ have any kind of business relationships with unbelievers? To answer these questions, we need to consider other things taught in the Bible.

For example, when explaining the need to separate themselves from a Christian who continues to live immorally, the apostle Paul said: “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people--not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world” (1Cor. 5:9-13 ESV). Immorality and dishonesty in Christian believers must not be tolerated. Instead, Jesus taught that his followers are to be a “light to the world” and the preserving “salt of the earth” (Matt. 5:12-16). They cannot be that good influence upon the world by hiding their light and totally separating themselves from the world that needs to hear the message of Christ and see it lived in their presence.

The Lord’s apostle also wrote that “if a brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him” (1 Cor. 7:12-13). This admonition seems to assume that the unbeliever knows that his/her spouse is a Christian who lives according the teachings of Jesus Christ and is tolerant of the

believing spouse's convictions and way of life and does not expect the Christian spouse to compromise his/her faith. However, the apostle added: "But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved" (1Cor. 7:12-15 ESV). If the unbelieving spouse is unwilling to tolerate the believer and chooses to leave the marriage, the believer is not expected to compromise his or her faith in order to keep that marriage.

When Paul said: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers," he was using the figurative analogy of the yoke of oxen well-known in the ancient world. The yoke tied two oxen together so that they shared equally the load that needed to be pulled. If they were to pull in different directions, the oxen could go nowhere. The same applies to human relationships like marriage, business partnerships or social associations. They can only make progress if they are pulling in the same direction. Otherwise, one of them must compromise. The apostle was warning Christians not to get themselves entangled in any obligatory relationship that could cause them to compromise their moral values in Christ. When a Christian finds himself or herself in any relationship with a person who is dishonest or immoral, that Christian should separate from that partnership or association before his reputation and life as a Christian is undermined. But when these relationships do not hinder a Christian from obedience to Jesus, there may be an opportunity to influence unbelievers for Christ.

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