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9:00 a.m. Christian Education

10:00 a.m. Worship

Children's Sunday School during Worship



"From the Heart: Living Pure in a Toxic World"

2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1

Rev. Ron Holmes

September 26, 2010



One thing you might not know about me is I played one year of college football. I don't talk about it much because it was a pretty unremarkable year—I was the third linebacker in a two linebacker system...and the first two linebackers never got hurt. I played on a few special teams, kickoffs and punts, blocked on extra points and field goals, but that was about it. I did manage to play enough to earn my varsity letter, which wasn't bad for a freshman. But most of my time during games was spent holding a clipboard keeping track of our opponent's plays that our defensive coordinator would occasionally consult in order to determine our defensive alignments. I might have had a future in college football, after all I was just a freshman and had lettered on the varsity. But the truth of the matter was...my heart just wasn't in it. I was a baseball guy. So, I decided not to return to football after that first year and devoted my athletic attention to baseball. The best thing I can say about my football career is that I didn't get hurt. No torn knee ligaments, no separated shoulders, no concussions. Life was pretty safe on that sideline holding that clipboard!

One thing I remember from that year was our defensive backfield coach, a colorful guy with the equally colorful name, Buck Rollins. Great name for a coach, don't you think? I think Coach Rollins was from Texas, although I don't know for sure. But he had that Texas drawl and was full of colorful little axioms that just sounded like a Texan. One time, we went into halftime tied with a team we should've been beating handily. However, our defensive secondary had made several mistakes leading to two long touchdown passes that tied the game right before halftime. As you can imagine, our locker room was a quiet, somber place. The only sounds were sounds of anger—a locker being slammed, cursing here and there. During halftime, the offense and the defense always separated, meeting with their respective coaches to go over the first half of play and any adjustments we were going to make. So, there I was, clipboard in hand, uniform relatively clean, gathering with my defensive teammates, maintaining an appropriately somber and angry mood, all of us dreading the arrival of our coaches—who were not going to be in a good mood. In they came, obviously loaded for bear. The first to speak was Coach Rollins.

Getting in the faces of his defensive backfield players who had made some critical mistakes leading to the long touchdown passes, he said (and he seldom cussed), "What in the goll darn heck is going on out there?" And then he said this, "You guys are so stupid you couldn't pour water from a boot if the directions were on the heel!" Which I found funny. I don't think he meant it to be funny however. The mood was not good for laughter, or even a smile. I put my clipboard to good use at that moment, burying my face in it as if searching for some key statistic to share with the coaches to help us win the game...when actually I was using it to hide my smiling face, stifling my laughter.

Now, I told you that story in order to share with you another Buck Rollins axiom. One of the difficult things about playing linebacker is that you have to defend both the run and the pass. You have to read the offensive movement and determine if you come up to stop a running play, or if you need to fall back and defend the pass. This, by the way, is the purpose of the "play action pass," to hold the linebackers for a running play when actually you're going to pass. We worked on that constantly in practice. Oftentimes, I found myself in-between positions, a kind of linebacker's "no man's land" where you're not in position to defend either the run or the pass. Many times in practice Coach Rollins would yell at me, "Holmes, where are you going? In that position you're neither fish nor fowl." It took me awhile before I understood what he meant!

Life in the world for a Christian can often be like that. Life throws deception at us, a "play action pass" if you will that threatens to draw us out of position. That is Paul's concern in this section of his second letter to the Corinthians. "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" is the phrase that draws the most attention from this passage. The image likely comes to Paul from the laws of Deuteronomy and, specifically, Deuteronomy 22:10, "*Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together.*" It's a kind of humorous image...but a very practical one as well. Just as one would not want to yoke together an ox and a donkey for plowing, so too should believers not be yoked together with unbelievers. That phrase has a long history of proper and improper applications. Most often it is applied to dating and marriage and there is wisdom in its caution. It is very difficult to maintain one's faith, much less grow in one's faith, when one's spouse is an unbeliever. Especially if the spouse is hostile toward matters of faith. Sometimes there is a benign indifference from a spouse and the Christian in the relationship is able to pursue activities for nurturing his or her faith without opposition from the spouse. It can still lead to difficulties—challenges over commitment of time and resources to something that is not shared by the spouse, for example. The birth of children and the question of whether the children are to be baptized and raised in the church is another area of potential conflict in a "yoked together marriage" of believer and unbeliever. There is some wisdom in this passage and my counsel to anyone involved in a relationship with someone else is to seriously consider matters of faith in the relationship...if your faith means anything to you.

It applies to business also. Perhaps less so than marriage, but being in partnership in business with someone who doesn't share your beliefs can lead to similar problems. Does the exercising of your faith create problems concerning time and focus on the business? What about business practices? For example, what is appropriate in entertaining clients? With whom do you conduct business...and with whom would you not do business? Frankly, these are the kinds of issues that the investment program of the Presbyterian Church has struggled with for years—with what businesses and types of businesses do you invest or not invest? There is some wisdom in this passage to considering seriously the impact on your faith in conducting your business...especially in partnering with another in business.

There is, however, a larger point to be made here. The larger point here is that our faith ought to be applied to and impacting all areas of our lives. I can't think of one area of life to which faith isn't relevant. Marriage. Business. Social activities. Recreational activities. Education. God is interested in every area of our lives. God wants to be involved in every area of our lives. As Paul points out in paraphrasing several Old Testament passages, God wants to live with us, to walk among us, to be our God and for us to be His

people. And there are some places God does not want us to go. There are some activities God does not want us to be involved with. There are people God does not want us to be involved with because they will pull us away from Him. We ought to be cautious toward situations in which we find ourselves "yoked together with unbelievers."

Are you familiar with the actress Patricia Heaton? She's most noted for her role as Debra Barone, Ray's wife in the sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*. She's also noted for being a Christian and serious about her faith in an industry I imagine is very tough to not become yoked with unbelievers. A few years ago the story was told in entertainment circles of how Patricia Heaton walked out of an awards show—I believe it was the American Music Awards. When asked why she walked out, she said something to the effect that the humor presented on stage was stupid and vulgar and she decided not to be a part of it anymore. Being a Christian means there are some places you do not go, some people you do not hang out with, and some situations you walk away from.

The problem, of course, is how to be in the world but not of the world. How are we to be "missional"—out there in the community, developing relationships in all those walks of life I previously mentioned, focused on searching for the lost that we might bring them to Christ—and not be yoked together with unbelievers? To be sure, some of the misapplication of the phrase "do not be yoked together with unbelievers" has led to individuals and groups attempting to totally separate from the rest of the world. They remain "pure," by whatever standards the group adheres to, but they have no interchange with the world and, therefore, no impact. Not of the world...but not in it either. How does one appropriately live out not being yoked together with unbelievers, living in the world but not of the world? And we need to understand here, the "yoked together" implies a deep relationship. It's not the beginnings of a relationship occurring in the missional process, it's not the casual relationships we have with the waiter at the restaurant we frequently go to, the checkout clerk at the grocery store where we shop. "Yoked together" implies a deep relationship—like marriage or business partnerships. Yet, even in the relationships of our missional outreach, there is a danger of being influenced away from matters of faith. How does one appropriately live out being "missional," yet not becoming yoked together with unbelievers? How does one live out the command to be in the world but not of the world?

The answer is...maintaining a proper balance in our lives. We go out into the world—always carrying Christ with us, first of all—only to make certain we return to our foundations of faith support. We don't stay in this sanctuary continuing our corporate worship together. We go out, extending our worship into the other activities of our lives in service to God. But we also return to the sanctuary of our corporate worship. We don't stay forever in our small groups of Bible study and Sunday School, enjoying only the fellowship we have with fellow believers in Christ. We go out into a frequently hostile and foreboding world to the gospel of Christ, seeking out unbelievers with whom we might share the love and good news of Jesus Christ. But, we return again and again to the support and encouragement of the fellowship of believers in our Bible studies and Sunday School classes. That is why Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs, why it was important for Paul to have his Barnabas, his Silas, his Timothy, his Titus as we'll see next week. That no one should go it alone. That no one should face alone the threat of being yoked with unbelievers because they are already yoked with other believers who provide support and encouragement, accountability and correction when needed. I am certain that is essential for a Patricia Heaton as she lives and moves in her career in the entertainment industry.

To live pure in a toxic world, to avoid being yoked together with unbelievers, to avoid finding ourselves in a position where we are neither fish nor fowl...we need each other. Let's take a moment for silent reflection.