

The Book of 2 Corinthians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: Do Not Be Unequally Yoked

2 Corinthians 6:1–18

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Second Corinthians 6 joins two themes that the world keeps apart: warm, open-hearted love and clear, holy boundaries. Doctrinally, the teacher should be ready to handle the sober warning that grace can be received “in vain,” the urgency of the “day of salvation,” the marks of an authentic servant of God, and above all the command not to be “unequally yoked with unbelievers,” grounded in the truth that the church is the temple of the living God. This last theme calls for special care, because it is easily distorted in two opposite directions: into a harsh, isolationist withdrawal from all contact with unbelievers, or into a careless worldliness that ignores the command altogether.

The teacher should present the doctrine of holiness and separation accurately. Paul is not telling Christians to abandon the world; he himself spent his life among unbelievers, and he says plainly elsewhere that to avoid all contact with sinners we would have to leave the world entirely (1 Corinthians 5:9–10). The command concerns binding, formative partnerships, yokes, that compromise our allegiance to Christ and pull us toward the kingdom of darkness. The grounding truth is the indwelling presence of God: because His people are His temple, they are to be set apart, distinct, holy, while remaining lovingly engaged with those they hope to win.

At the same time, this chapter is meant to soften and to fortify the heart at once. The warning about grace received in vain is meant to stir a fresh, urgent devotion. Paul's open heart is meant to call us out of guarded, narrow love into the wide-open affection that marks the body of Christ. And the call to separation is meant to give us courage to draw holy lines where compromise has crept in. So aim at both targets. Help students grasp clearly what holiness and separation mean and do not mean, and lead them to live as the temple of the living God, both warmly loving and unmistakably set apart.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul appeals to the Corinthians “not to receive the grace of God in vain,” and declares, “Now is the favorable time... now is the day of salvation” (vv. 1–2). What does it mean to receive God's grace “in vain,” and why does this warning, addressed to believers, underscore the urgency of responding to God today rather than presuming on grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the weight of Paul's warning: it is possible to "receive the grace of God in vain." This is addressed to people who have already received grace. The danger is not that God's grace is insufficient, but that a person can hold it carelessly, fail to live in it, and so render it fruitless in their life.

Connect this to the urgency of verse 2: "Now is the day of salvation." Paul quotes Isaiah to press the point that grace calls for a present response, not a postponed one. The grace of God is not a possession we can take for granted; it is a relationship we must live in today.

This stands quietly against any presumption that, having once received grace, our present response no longer matters. Paul plainly thinks it does. He pleads with believers to take their walk with God seriously now, lest the grace they received become a wasted gift.

Help students feel the tenderness as well as the urgency. Paul says he is "working together with him," pleading alongside God Himself. The warning is not a threat from a distant judge but the appeal of a loving Father who does not want His grace to be received and then neglected.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The possibility of receiving God's grace "in vain" through neglect (v. 1)
- The urgency of responding to God today rather than presuming on grace (v. 2)
- Grace as a relationship to be lived in, not a possession to be taken for granted
- God's loving appeal underlying the warning

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to receive the grace of God "in vain"?
- Why does Paul stress that "now" is the day of salvation?
- How does this warning, addressed to believers, guard us against presuming on grace?

Question 2

Student Question:

Where have you allowed your response to God's grace to grow cold or casual, putting off until "later" a step of obedience, repentance, or surrender He is calling you to now? What would it look like to treat today as the day of salvation in that area?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks where students have let their response to grace grow cold or casual. Spiritual drift is rarely dramatic; it usually happens by slow neglect, a devotion that cools, a step of obedience perpetually postponed.

Help students name the specific area. Perhaps there is a sin they keep meaning to repent of, a reconciliation they keep delaying, a surrender they keep avoiding. The word “later” is often where grace is quietly received in vain.

Press the “now” of the text gently but firmly. The favorable time is not a hypothetical future moment when conditions improve; it is today. Whatever God is calling them to, the day to respond is this one.

Encourage one concrete step taken today rather than someday. The aim is to break the habit of deferral and to treat God’s grace as the urgent, present gift it is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual drift through slow neglect rather than dramatic rebellion
- The temptation to postpone obedience to a more convenient time
- Repentance and surrender as present, not future, responses
- Treating grace as urgent rather than something to act on eventually

Discussion Prompts

- Where has your response to God’s grace grown cold or casual?
- What step of obedience have you been putting off until “later”?
- What would it look like to treat today as the day of salvation in that area?

Question 3

Student Question:

To show that he has put “no obstacle in anyone’s way,” Paul commends himself “as servants of God” through a long list of hardships and graces, “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing... having nothing, yet possessing everything” (vv. 3–10). What does this teach about what genuinely authenticates a servant of God, and how does it differ from the way the world measures success?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here Paul opens his life to show what an authentic servant of God looks like. The list is striking: not titles, crowds, or comforts, but “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments,” endured with “purity, patience, kindness... genuine love.” His credentials are his faithful endurance and his Christlike character under pressure.

Draw the contrast with the world’s measures of success. The world counts wealth, ease, applause, and visible achievement. Paul counts faithfulness through hardship, integrity when no one applauds, and the power of God shining through obvious weakness. He is “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing... having nothing, yet possessing everything.”

Help students see that this reframes how we evaluate ministry and the Christian life. We are tempted to be impressed by the polished and prosperous and to overlook the quietly faithful. God's measure is different. The servant He commends is the one who endures, loves, and remains pure through trials.

Note Paul's concern that he put "no obstacle in anyone's way." His holiness was not for show but so that nothing in his conduct would discredit the gospel. The authentic servant guards his life precisely so that Christ, not his own failings, is what people see.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faithful endurance and Christlike character as the marks of an authentic servant
- God's measure of success contrasted with the world's
- The power of God displayed through weakness and hardship
- Guarding one's conduct so as not to obstruct the gospel (v. 3)

Discussion Prompts

- What does Paul's list reveal about what truly authenticates a servant of God?
- How does this differ from the way our culture measures success?
- Why was Paul so concerned to put no obstacle in anyone's way?

Question 4

Student Question:

When you are under pressure, in hardship, criticism, or weariness, what does your conduct reveal about your faith? Is there a way your reaction to difficulty has become an "obstacle" that obscures Christ to those watching, and what grace from Paul's list do you most need God to grow in you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question turns Paul's example toward the student's own conduct under pressure. Hardship reveals what is really inside us. Criticism, weariness, and difficulty press on the heart and bring out what is there.

Help students examine their typical reactions to pressure, irritability, self-pity, harshness, withdrawal, and consider whether these have become "obstacles" that obscure Christ to those watching. Our witness is often tested not in our best moments but in our worst.

Then turn to Paul's list of graces, purity, patience, kindness, genuine love, and invite students to name the one they most need God to grow in them. The point is not condemnation but a prayerful desire for Christlike character to replace reactive sinfulness.

Encourage them to ask God specifically for that grace and to watch for the next pressure as an opportunity to respond differently. The aim is a life in which hardship displays Christ rather than obscuring Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hardship as a revealer of what is truly in the heart
- The believer's conduct under pressure as part of his witness
- Christlike graces replacing reactive, sinful responses
- Dependence on God to grow the character we lack

Discussion Prompts

- What does your conduct under pressure reveal about your faith?
- Has a reaction to difficulty ever become an obstacle that obscured Christ?
- Which grace from Paul's list do you most need God to grow in you?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul tells the Corinthians, "Our heart is wide open... widen your hearts also" (vv. 11–13). What does this teach about the open-hearted, vulnerable love that should mark relationships in the body of Christ, and why does Paul tie sound teaching so closely to genuine affection?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul interrupts his weighty argument with a burst of affection: "Our heart is wide open... widen your hearts also." Even in the middle of teaching hard truths, Paul's relationship with the Corinthians is one of open, vulnerable love. He has held nothing back from them and longs for the same in return.

Help students see the connection Paul makes between truth and love. He does not teach them from a cold distance; he gives them himself. Sound doctrine, in Paul's ministry, travels on the rails of genuine affection. The two belong together.

This challenges a common distortion in which doctrine is delivered without warmth or warmth is offered without truth. The body of Christ is meant to be a place of open hearts, where people are known, loved, and unguarded with one another, even as they hold one another to the truth.

Note that Paul calls them to widen their hearts. Love can be narrowed by hurt, suspicion, or self-protection. The call is to keep the heart open, to refuse the slow closing that wounds and disappointments tempt us toward.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Open-hearted, vulnerable love as a mark of the body of Christ
- The union of sound teaching and genuine affection
- The tendency of hearts to narrow through hurt and self-protection
- The call to keep the heart wide open toward fellow believers

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul tie his teaching so closely to open-hearted affection?
- What causes hearts to grow narrow within the church?
- What would it look like to widen your heart toward others?

Question 6

Student Question:

Is there a person or group toward whom your heart has grown narrow, guarded, or cold, perhaps within the church itself? What has caused you to close your heart there, and what would it look like to “widen” it as Paul urges?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question asks students to locate a place where their own heart has grown narrow. Often this happens within the church itself, toward a person who hurt us, a group we find difficult, a relationship soured by misunderstanding.

Help students name the cause honestly. A closed heart usually has a story, a wound, a betrayal, a disappointment. Naming it is not to justify the closing but to bring it into the light where it can be healed.

Point to the gospel resource for reopening the heart. We widen our hearts toward others as we remember how wide God’s heart has been toward us. Forgiveness, prayer for the person, and small steps of renewed engagement gradually reopen what hurt has closed.

Encourage one concrete step to widen the heart this week, perhaps a prayer for the person, a kind word, a willingness to let go of the grievance. The aim is to refuse the slow narrowing of love and to keep the heart open as Christ’s is open to us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The narrowing of the heart through hurt and disappointment
- Widening the heart in response to God’s wide love for us
- Forgiveness and prayer as means of reopening a closed heart
- The call to open-hearted love even toward difficult people

Discussion Prompts

- Toward whom has your heart grown narrow or guarded?
- What caused you to close your heart there?
- What concrete step could begin to widen it this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul asks, "What partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial?" (vv. 14–15). What do these contrasts teach about the fundamental incompatibility between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness, and why does Paul frame the issue in such stark terms?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul drives home the command against being unequally yoked with a series of sharp contrasts: righteousness and lawlessness, light and darkness, Christ and Belial (a name for the devil), the temple of God and idols. The rhetorical questions all expect the same answer: nothing. These realms have no true partnership.

Help students grasp the underlying truth. There are ultimately two kingdoms, two allegiances, two ways. One belongs to Christ and His light; the other to darkness and the evil one. A believer cannot pretend these are compatible or build their life as though one foot can stand firmly in each.

This is not a denial that Christians live among unbelievers or love them. It is a recognition that at the deepest level, our allegiance and direction cannot be shared. We cannot be bound in a partnership that pulls us toward darkness and still walk wholly in the light.

The starkness of Paul's language is intentional. In an age that prizes blending and blurring, the gospel insists on a fundamental distinction. To belong to Christ is to belong to the light, and that belonging shapes everything, even as we carry the light into the darkness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fundamental incompatibility of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness
- Two ultimate allegiances that cannot be merged (Matthew 6:24)
- The believer's belonging to Christ and the light as decisive for life direction
- Clear distinction rather than blending as the biblical posture

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul frame the issue in such stark, either-or terms?
- What does it mean that there is no true partnership between light and darkness?
- How is this different from saying Christians should avoid all unbelievers?

Question 8

Student Question:

Is there a relationship, partnership, influence, or habit in your life that is quietly pulling you toward compromise rather than toward Christ? What makes it hard to address, and what would faithfulness to the Lord require of you there?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question asks students to identify a specific tie pulling them toward compromise. Paul's warning is not abstract; it touches real relationships, partnerships, influences, and habits that shape the direction of a life.

Help students examine the formative influences in their lives. The question is not whether they have contact with unbelievers, but whether any binding relationship or habitual influence is steadily pulling them away from Christ, a partnership, a romance, a friendship that draws them into sin, a stream of influence that reshapes their values.

Be pastorally careful. Some of these ties are tender, a dating relationship, a business partnership, a close friendship. The aim is not a reckless severing of all relationships but an honest reckoning with influences that compromise our allegiance to Christ, and a willingness to act faithfully.

Encourage prayerful honesty and, where needed, courageous action, perhaps setting a boundary, seeking counsel from elders, or ending a partnership that cannot be reconciled with following Christ. The aim is faithfulness even when it costs.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Formative influences and binding partnerships that compromise allegiance to Christ
- The difference between ordinary contact with unbelievers and compromising ties
- The courage to set boundaries or sever harmful partnerships
- Seeking godly counsel in tender or complex relationships

Discussion Prompts

- Is there a relationship or influence quietly pulling you toward compromise?
- What makes it hard to address?
- What would faithfulness to Christ require of you there?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul commands, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers,” and grounds it in this: “We are the temple of the living God,” calling believers to “come out from them, and be separate,” with the promise, “I will be a father to you” (vv. 14–18). What does it mean that the church and the Christian are the temple of the living God, what kind of separation from the world is this command actually calling for (and not calling for), and how does God’s promise to dwell among His people as a Father shape the way we pursue holiness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the chapter, and it requires careful, balanced handling. Paul commands, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers,” and grounds it in a glorious truth: “We are the temple of the living God.” The image of the yoke is agricultural, two animals bound together to pull in one direction. To be unequally yoked is to be bound in a partnership with someone moving the opposite way, so that we are pulled off course.

First, clarify what this command is not. It is not a call to isolation or to despising unbelievers. Paul himself lived and worked among them constantly, and he says plainly that to avoid all contact with the immoral of the world we would have to leave the world entirely (1 Corinthians 5:9–10). Jesus was the friend of sinners. The command does not forbid ordinary friendships, employment, or kindness toward unbelievers; indeed, we cannot win people we will not love and engage.

Now clarify what the command is. It forbids the kind of binding, formative partnership that compromises our allegiance to Christ and yokes us to those pulling toward darkness. This certainly includes the marriage of a believer to an unbeliever, business or spiritual partnerships that require us to violate our convictions, and any close, controlling alliance that pulls our hearts away from the Lord. The principle is that our deepest bonds and commitments must not pull against our commitment to Christ.

Then dwell on the magnificent grounding truth: the church and the Christian are “the temple of the living God.” God Himself dwells among His people by His Spirit. This is why holiness matters so much. A temple is set apart for the presence of God; it cannot be shared with idols. Because the living God dwells in us and among us, we are called to be distinct, set apart, holy. The call to “come out from them, and be separate, and touch no unclean thing” is the call of a holy God to a people He indwells.

Finally, let students feel the tenderness of the promise attached to the command. Separation is not bleak deprivation; it is the doorway to intimacy with God. “I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me.” God asks us to be set apart not to rob us but to give us Himself. Holiness, rightly understood, is not the loss of joy but the path into the embrace of a Father. Help students pursue a holiness that is warm, engaged, and distinct, set apart for God while still carrying His light to the world.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church and the believer as the temple of the living God, indwelt by His Spirit (v. 16)
- The command against binding partnerships that compromise allegiance to Christ (v. 14)
- What the command does not require: isolation from or contempt for unbelievers (1 Corinthians 5:9–10)
- What it does include: marriage, alliances, and bonds that pull the heart from Christ
- Holiness rooted in God's indwelling presence, not mere rule-keeping
- Separation as the doorway to intimacy with God as a Father (vv. 17–18)

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the church and the Christian are the temple of the living God?
- What kind of separation is this command calling for, and what is it not calling for?
- How does God's promise to be a Father to us reshape the way we pursue holiness?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter, the urgency of grace, the authentic servant, the wide-open heart, the holy boundary, the indwelling presence of God. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this passage, and what is your first step toward that change this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the chapter and asks for one specific change. Help students avoid generalities; the chapter has pressed on the urgency of grace, the marks of an authentic servant, the wide-open heart, and the holy boundary.

Invite each student to discern the Spirit's particular pressure. For one it may be responding to grace today rather than someday. For another it may be widening a narrowed heart. For another it may be addressing a compromising tie or pursuing a warmer, distinct holiness.

Ask for both the change and the first step. The change is the inward turn; the step is concrete, a delayed obedience finally acted on, a heart reopened, a boundary drawn, a holiness embraced.

Close with the chapter's great encouragement: we are the temple of the living God, indwelt by His Spirit, welcomed by a Father. That identity is what this lesson is meant to form, a people both warmly loving and unmistakably set apart for God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual formation, not mere information, as the goal of study
- The believer's identity as the indwelt temple of God
- Holiness held together with open-hearted love
- Obedience as the proof that truth has taken root

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from this chapter is the Spirit pressing on you most directly?
- What single change is Jesus inviting you to make?
- What is your first concrete step toward it this week?