

August 30, 2009 2 Cor. 6:1, 14-18 “Sacred Partnership” by Richard Boatman

¹ As God’s partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God’s grace and then ignore it... ¹⁴⁻¹⁸Don't become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That's not partnership; that's war. Is light best friends with dark? Does Christ go strolling with the Devil? Do trust and mistrust hold hands? Who would think of setting up pagan idols in God's holy Temple? But that is exactly what we are, each of us a temple in whom God lives. God himself put it this way: “I'll live in them, move into them; I'll be their God and they'll be my people. So leave the corruption and compromise; leave it for good,” says God. “Don't link up with those who will pollute you. I want you all for myself. I'll be a Father to you; you'll be sons and daughters to me.” The Word of the Master, God.

Remember that the understood premise of chapter six is partnership with God, a partnership between God and those who don't ignore this incredible gift but who take grace seriously. Ephesians 2 says, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love for us, even when we were dead in our sins, made us alive together with Christ...for by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” (4-8).

The gift of God is that we have been made alive, spiritually resurrected. Through faith in Christ, the seed of a new nature—the nature of God—has been conceived in us. 1 Peter 1:23 declares, “For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable...through the living and abiding word of God.” Peter continues in 1:4 of his second letter: “[Through grace God has given] 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 caused by evil desires.”

“The old story is told of the scorpion that sat on one bank of a great lake, looking longingly towards the dim and distant other side to which it wished to travel. But scorpions are not made for water and so this scorpion simply waited and longed until one afternoon, a bright and beautiful swan sailed gracefully down the lake. The scorpion called to it in greeting and the swan turned itself slightly and came near the shore. ‘I very much wish to cross to the other side of the lake,’ said the scorpion, ‘but I am unable to swim you see. Would you be gracious enough to allow me to ride upon your back to that distant shore?’ ‘I would be delighted,’ replied the swan as it lowered one of its mighty wings so the scorpion might climb upon its back, which it did, uttering many thanks. And so, with the scorpion upon

its back, the swan began paddling with its great webbed feet. Soon, the two were well under way. After an hour or so, the pair finally reached the bank of the other shore. Just before climbing off, the scorpion arched its segmented tail, the deadly stinger at its end poised high above the swan's back. In a flash, the poisonous barb lashed out, burying itself deeply into the base of the swan's long and graceful neck. The swan's eyes rolled in terror and pain, its body becoming suddenly still and tense as the burning venom coursed its way towards the heart. Painfully, the swan hung its head low to the water's surface and looked back at the scorpion sitting peacefully upon the ground. 'Why have you done such a thing as to sting me when I was kind enough to freely give you a ride across the lake,' asked the swan. The scorpion replied, 'Surely you must know, it is my nature to sting and to kill.'"

It was our distorted nature to sin, to miss the mark of God. And such a nature could not partake of and partner with the kingdom of heaven. But through Christ, we have been cloaked with a heavenly nature and birthed by a new, living seed, the seed of God's Holy Spirit.

It is to this new nature that Paul appeals: "Don't become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That's not partnership; that's war. Is light best friends with dark? Does Christ go strolling with the Devil? Do trust and mistrust hold hands? Who would think of setting up pagan idols in God's holy Temple?"

He is speaking of grace with a punch. Too often we have seen grace as merely a means of forgiveness. We commit sins, ask for forgiveness, give thanks that God loves us just like we are, and then go right back to the old patterns. World War II martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls this "cheap grace." Grace with a punch brings forgiveness that leads to formation, repentance that leads to restoration, deliverance that leads to discipleship. But lest we get lost in nice alliteration, let us pay attention to what Paul is saying.

A seminary friend of mine was a successful lawyer before ever earning his Masters of Divinity degree and becoming a pastor. He's a bright guy. But he told of the time he was working on his computer at home when it locked up. He had no idea what to do, so he called his six year old granddaughter over to see if she could help. He said she put her little bottom up on the chair and scooted his off. She manipulated some keys and within seconds had things humming again. He said to her, "How did you do that?" She said, "Okay, I'll show you again, but pay attention this time."

The power of God's message to us comes from attentiveness and application. We listen to what it says and seriously consider the implications as we apply it to our lives. Again, verse fourteen says, "Don't become partners with those who reject God." Another translation says, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers." Yet another says, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers." Now there's an image. Imagine two oxen hooked together, one endeavoring to follow the master's commands and the other defiantly resisting his directives. How can you plow a field that way? How can you work together in accomplishing the important task before you? Either the defiant ox must become compliant, if not surrendered, or the obedient ox must compromise and divert from the path ahead.

There are many applications, but let us consider one. If you're a single Christian, Paul is saying, don't become romantically involved with someone who does not follow Christ, who does not endeavor to yield his/her will to Jesus and who does not put himself/herself in the environs conducive to such a lifestyle. Young people, if you take grace (God forming us into Christ's image) seriously, then you need to make a profound and purposeful commitment to date only believers. "But then I might go through high school or college alone." That's true. But if you date someone, you can develop feelings for that person. And if you develop feelings for that person, you may end up falling in love with that person. And when you fall in love, you want to be with that person and marry that person. If you don't make a decision before you become involved, it becomes more difficult to break it off. Don't settle for second best. As one United Methodist pastor told his daughter: "If you find someone who loves Jesus more than he loves you, he'll be able to love you more than someone who doesn't love Jesus." This means that you have to be clear and intentional about your faith and the biblical standards of "not becoming partners with those who reject God."

Taking grace seriously has profound implications for the choices we make every day, for, as the apostle says, "each of us [is] a temple in whom God lives." You've heard of living life in the fast lane? Our call as temples, living sanctuaries, is to live life in the centered lane. What do I mean? I mean to live centered on Christ, focused on what it means to be God-indwelled.

So how do we live in the centered lane? Today's passage prompts two modern phrases that capture the essence: *Keep the pollution down & Keep the G.P.S. on.*

2 Corinthians 6:17 says, "Don't link up with those who will pollute you." Watch what you expose your inner "temple" to. Have you ever watched a movie or read a book or deceived in such a way that it made you feel dirty? That's inner pollution.

Jesus chased the exploiters and greedy merchants and opportunistic religious leaders out of the Temple, saying to them, “This is supposed to be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.” Jesus was guarding his Father’s Temple. That’s what it means to keep the pollution down. We must guard our thought lives, our choices. We guard them with daily watchfulness of our spirit through the Word and prayer.

A few weeks ago we went to a St. Louis Cardinals’ baseball game with some dear friends. Though the Cardinals lost, it was still a super game with twenty-five hits and a couple homeruns. About halfway through, we got hungry. We hadn’t been to a major league game in years. So, though we knew food and beverages would be high, we had no idea we’d be entering the Theater of The Absurd. We bought three hot dogs and one bottle of water to share. Twenty-three dollars! They just as well had put a gun in my back and robbed me. We paid twenty-three dollars because we were at a Cardinals’ game. Let me put this in perspective. Yesterday Fareway grocery store was selling a pork burger sandwich, a bag of chips and a bottle of water—all three for just \$2. And then you could stand and look at the trees across the street and watch cardinals or blue jays or orioles for free.

The price of food at a professional game caught me off guard. A lot catches me off guard these days. I get busy with administrative stuff and start swerving from the centered lane. I allow petty things to arrest my attention or pity parties to engage my thoughts and before you know it, I’m spiritually swerving again. Are you like that? Thank the Lord for his inner *G.P.S.—God’s Positioning System*. The G.P.S. in our car often says, “Recalculating,” or “Make a U-turn.” From the Throne of Grace the Holy Spirit speaks within. He takes our wrong turns and recalculates a course that gets us back on track. Sometimes he says, “Stop. Turn around.”

You see, we are his Temple, the sanctuary of His Majesty with whom we have a sacred partnership. This partnership demands that we take grace seriously, focusing on formation not just forgiveness. It requires that we guard our hearts and minds, keeping the spiritual pollution down and our *God Positioning Systems* engaged. For, you see, we are indwelled by the Majestic One and he is making our inner dwelling fit for a King.