

## **The unequal yoke (2)**

The marriage yoke

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And first, then, let us consider the domestic or marriage yoke. What pen can portray the mental anguish, the moral misery, together with the ruinous consequences, as to spiritual life and testimony, flowing from a Christian's marriage with an unconverted person? I suppose nothing can be more deplorable than the condition of one who discovers, when it is too late, that he has linked himself for life with one who cannot have a single thought or feeling in common with him. One desires to serve Christ; the other can only serve the devil: one breathes after the things of God the other sighs for the things of this present world the one earnestly seeks to mortify the flesh, with all its affections and desires; the other only seeks to minister to and gratify these very things. Like a sheep and a goat linked together, the sheep longs to feed on the green pasture in the field, while, on the other hand, the goat craves the brambles which grow in the ditch. The sad consequence is that both are starved. One will not feed on the pasture, and the other cannot feed upon the brambles, and thus neither gets what his nature craves, unless the goat, by superior strength, succeeds in forcing his unequally yoked companion to remain amongst the brambles, there to languish and die.

The moral of this is plain enough; and, moreover, it is, alas! of but too common occurrence. The goat generally succeeds in gaining his end. The worldly partner carries his or her point, in almost every instance. It will be found, almost without exception, that in cases of the unequal marriage yoke, the poor Christian is the sufferer, as is evidenced by the bitter fruits of a bad conscience, a depressed heart a gloomy spirit, and a desponding mind. A heavy price, surely, to pay for the gratification of some natural affection, or the attainment, it may be, of some paltry worldly advantage. In fact, a marriage of this kind is the death-knell of practical Christianity, and of progress in the divine life. It is morally impossible that any one can be an unfettered disciple of Christ with his neck in the marriage yoke with an unbeliever.

As well might a racer in the Olympic or Isthmian games have expected to gain the crown of victory by attaching a heavy weight or a dead body to his person. It is enough, surely, to have one dead body to sustain, without attaching another. There never was a true Christian yet who did not find that he had abundant work to do in endeavouring to grapple with the evils of *one* heart, without going to burden himself with the evils of two; and, without doubt, the man who, foolishly and disobediently, marries an unconverted woman; or the woman who marries an unconverted man, is burdened with the combined evils of two hearts; and who is sufficient for these things? One can most fully count upon the grace of Christ for the subjugation of his own evil nature; but he certainly cannot count, in the same way, upon that grace in reference to the evil nature of his unequal yoke-fellow. If he have yoked himself ignorantly, the Lord will meet him personally, on the ground of full confession, with entire restoration of soul, but in the matter of his discipleship, he will never recover it.

Paul could say, "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection; lest by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be disapproved of." And he said this, too, in immediate connection with "striving for the mastery." "Know ye not that they which run in a race, run all, but one obtains the prize? So run that ye may obtain. And every one that strives for the mastery is temperate [self-controlled] in all things: now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beats the air," 1Cor 9:24 -27.

Here, it is not a question of life or salvation, but simply one of “running in a race,” and “so running that we obtain,” not life, but “an incorruptible crown.” The fact of being called to run assumes the possession of life, for no one would call upon dead men to run in a race. I have got life, evidently, before I begin to run at all, and, hence, though I should fail in the race, I do not lose my life, but only the crown, for this and not that was the object proposed to be run for. We are not called to run for life, inasmuch as we get that, not by running, but “by faith of Jesus Christ,” who by His death has purchased life for us, and implants it in us, by the mighty energy of the Holy Ghost. Now, this life, being the life of a risen Christ, is eternal, for He is the eternal Son; as He says Himself, in His address to the Father, in John 17, “Thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give *eternal life* to as many as thou hast given him.” This life is not conditional. He does not *give* us life, as sinners, and then set us to run for it as saints, with the gloomy foreboding, that we may lose the precious boon by failing in the race. This would be to “run *uncertainly*,” as many alas! are trying to do, who profess to have entered upon the course, and yet know not whether they have life or not. Such persons are running for life, and not for a crown; but God does not set up life at the goal, as the reward of victory, but *gives* it at the starting post, as the power by which we run. The power to run, and the object of running, are two very different things; yet they are constantly confounded by persons who are ignorant of the glorious gospel of the grace of God, in which Christ is set forth as the life and righteousness of all who believe on His name; and all this, moreover, as the free gift of God, and not as the reward of our running.

Now, in considering the terribly evil consequences of the unequal marriage yoke, it is mainly as bearing upon our discipleship that we are looking at them. I say, mainly, because our entire character and experience are deeply affected thereby. I very much question if any one can give a more effectual blow to his prosperity in the divine life, than by assuming an unequal yoke. Indeed, the very fact of so doing proves that spiritual decline has already set in, with most alarming symptoms; but as to his discipleship and testimony, the lamp thereof may be regarded as all but gone out; or if it does give an occasional faint glimmer, it only serves to make manifest the awful gloom of his unhappy position, and the appalling consequences of being “unequally yoked together with an unbeliever.”

Thus much as to the question of the unequal yoke, in its influence upon the life, the character, the testimony, and the discipleship, of a child of God. I would now say a word as to its moral effect, as exhibited in the domestic circle. Here, too, the consequences are truly melancholy. Nor could they possibly be otherwise. Two persons have come together in the closest and most intimate relationship, with tastes, habits, feelings, desires, tendencies, and objects diametrically opposite. They have nothing in common; so that, in every movement, they can but grate one against the other. The unbeliever cannot, in *reality*, go with the believer; and if there should, through excessive amiability, or downright hypocrisy, be a show of acquiescence, what is it worth in the sight of the Lord, who judges the true state of the heart in reference to Himself? But little indeed; yea, it is worse than worthless. Then, again, if the believer should, unhappily go in any measure with his unequal yoke-fellow, it can only be at the expense of his discipleship, and the consequence is, a condemning conscience in the sight of the Lord; and this, again, leads to heaviness of spirit, and, it may be, sourness of temper, in the domestic circle so that the grace of the gospel is, by no means commended, and the unbeliever is not attracted or won. Thus it is, in every way, most sorrowful. It is

dishonouring to God, destructive of spiritual prosperity, utterly subversive of discipleship and testimony, and entirely hostile to domestic peace and blessing. It produces estrangement, coldness, distance, and misunderstanding; or, if it does not produce these, it will, doubtless, lead, on the part of the Christian, to a forfeiture of his discipleship and his good conscience, both of which he may be tempted to offer as a sacrifice upon the altar of domestic peace. Thus, whatever way we look at it, an unequal yoke must lead to the most deplorable consequences.

Then, as to its effect upon children, it is equally sad. These are almost sure to flow in the current with the unconverted parent. "Their children spoke half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people." There can be no union of heart in the training of the children; no joint and mutual confidence in reference to them. One desires to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; the other desires to bring them up in the principles of the world, the flesh, and the devil: and as all the sympathies of the children, as they grow up, are likely to be ranged on the side of the latter, it is easy to see how it will end. In short, it is an unseemly, unscriptural, and vain effort to plough with an "unequal yoke," or to "sow the ground with mingled seed;" and all must end in sorrow and confusion.<sup>1</sup>

I shall, ere turning from this branch of our subject, offer a remark as to the reasons which generally actuate Christians in the matter of entering into the unequal marriage yoke. We all know, alas! how easily the poor heart persuades itself of the rightness of any step which it desires to take, and how the devil furnishes plausible arguments to convince us of its rightness – arguments which the moral condition of the soul causes us to regard as clear, forcible, and satisfactory. The very fact of our thinking of such a thing, proves our unfitness to weigh, with a well-balanced mind and spiritually-adjusted conscience, the solemn consequences of such a step. If the eye were single (that is, if we were governed but by one object, namely, the glory and honour of the Lord Jesus Christ) we should never entertain the idea of putting our necks into an unequal yoke; and, consequently, we should have no difficulty or perplexity about the matter. A racer, whose eye was resting on the crown, would not be troubled with any perplexity as to whether he ought to stop and tie a hundred-weight round his neck. Such a thought would never cross his mind: and not only so, but a thorough racer would have a distinct and almost intuitive perception of everything which would be likely to prove a hindrance to him in running the race; and, of course, with such a one, to perceive would be to reject with decision.<sup>2</sup>

Now, were it thus with Christians, in the matter of unscriptural marriage, it would save them a world of sorrow and perplexity; but it is not thus. The heart gets out of communion, and is morally incompetent to "try the things that differ;" and when in this condition, the devil gains an easy conquest, and speedy success in his wicked effort to induce the believer to yoke himself with "Belial" – with "unrighteousness" – with "darkness" – with "an infidel." When the soul is in full communion with God, it is entirely subject to His word; it sees things as He sees them, calls them what He calls them, and not what the devil or his own carnal heart would call them. In this way, the believer escapes the ensnaring influence of a deception which is very frequently brought to bear upon him in this matter, namely, a false profession of religion on the part of the person whom he desires to marry. This is a very common case. It is easy to show

symptoms of leaning towards the things of God; and the heart is treacherous and base enough to make a profession of religion in order to gain its end; and not only so, but the devil, who is "transformed into an angel of light," will lead to this false profession, in order thereby the more effectually to entrap the feet of a child of God. Thus it comes to pass that Christians, in this matter, suffer themselves to be satisfied, or at least profess themselves satisfied, with evidence of conversion, which, under any other circumstances, they would regard as utterly lame and flimsy.

But alas! experience soon opens the eyes to the *reality*. It is speedily discovered that the profession was all a vain show, that the *heart* is entirely in and of the world. Terrible discovery! Who can detail the bitter consequences of such a discovery – the anguish of heart – the bitter reproaches and cuttings of conscience – the shame and confusion – the loss of power and blessing – the forfeiture of spiritual peace and joy – the sacrifice of a life of usefulness? Who can describe all these things The man awakes from his delusive dream, and opens his eyes upon the tremendous reality, that he is yoked for life with "Belial!" Yes, this is what the Spirit calls it. It is not an inference, or a deduction arrived at by a process of reasoning; but a plain and positive statement of Holy Scripture, that thus the matter stands in reference to one who, from whatever motive, or under the influence of whatever reasons, or deceived by whatever false pretences, has entered into an unequal marriage-yoke.

Oh, my beloved Christian reader, if you are in danger of entering into such a yoke, let me earnestly, solemnly, and affectionately entreat of you to pause first, and weigh the matter in the balances of the sanctuary, ere you move forward a single hair's breadth on such a fatal path You may rest assured that you will no sooner have taken the step, than your heart will be assailed by hopeless regrets, and your life embittered by unnumbered sorrows. *Let nothing induce you to yoke with an unbeliever.* Are your affections engaged? Then, remember, they cannot be the affections of your new man; they are, be assured of it, those of the old or carnal nature, which you are called upon to mortify and set aside. Wherefore you should cry to God for spiritual power to rise above the influence of such affections; yea, to sacrifice them to Him. Again, are your interests concerned? Then remember that they are only *your* interests; and if they are promoted, Christ's interests are sacrificed by your yoking yourself with "Belial." Furthermore, they are only your temporal, and not your eternal interests. In point of fact, the interests of the believer and those of Christ ought to be identical; and it is plain that His interests, His honour, His truth, His glory, must inevitably be sacrificed, if a member of His body is linked with "Belial." This is the true way to look at the question. What are a few hundreds, or a few thousands, to an heir of heaven? "God is able to give thee much more than this." Are you going to sacrifice the truth of God, as well as your own spiritual peace, prosperity, and happiness, for a paltry trifle of gold, which must perish in the using of it? Ah! no. God forbid! Flee from it, as a bird from the snare, which it sees and knows. Stretch out the hand of genuine, well-braced whole-hearted discipleship, and take the knife and slay your affections and your interests on the altar of God and then, even though there should not be an audible voice from heaven to approve your act, you will have the invaluable testimony of an approving conscience and an ungrieved Spirit – an ample reward, surely, for the most costly sacrifice which you can make. May the Spirit of God give power to resist Satan's temptations!

It is hardly needful to remark, here, that in cases where conversion takes place after marriage,

the complexion of the matter is very materially altered. There will then be no smittings of conscience, for example; and the whole thing is modified in a variety of particulars. Still there will be difficulty, trial, and sorrow unquestionably. The only thing is that one can, far more happily, bring the trial and sorrow into the Lord's presence, when he has not deliberately and wilfully plunged himself thereinto; and, blessed be God, we know how ready He is to forgive, restore, and cleanse from all unrighteousness, the soul that makes full confession of its error and failure. This may comfort the heart of one who has been brought to the Lord after marriage. Moreover, to such an one the Spirit of God has given specific direction and blessed encouragement in the following passage: "If any brother have an unbelieving wife, and she think proper to dwell with him, let him not put her away: and if any woman have an unbelieving husband, and he think proper to dwell with her, let her not put him away (for the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband, else were your children unclean, but now are they holy) for what knowest thou, O wife, if thou shalt save thy husband? Or what knowest thou, O husband, if thou shalt save thy wife?" ( 1Cor 7:12-16.)

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## Footnotes

[1] There are many cases in which one finds persons united, who, though they cannot exactly be said to be "unequally yoked," are, to say the least, very badly matched. Their tempers, tastes, habits, and views, are totally different; and so different, that instead of maintaining a desirable balance (which opposite tempers, if properly arranged, might do), they keep up a perpetual jar, to the sad derangement of the domestic circle, and the dishonour of the Lord's name. All this might be very much obviated if Christians would only wait upon God, and make His glory more their object than personal interest or affection.

[2] It is important for the Christian to bear in mind the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, "If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light." whenever I am in perplexity as to my path, I have reason to suspect that my eye is not single; for assuredly, perplexity is not compatible with a "body full of light." we frequently go to pray for guidance in matters with which, if the eye were single, and the will subject, we would have nothing whatever to do, and hence we should have no need to pray about them. To pray about aught concerning which the word of God is plain marks the activity of a rebellious will. As a recent writer has well remarked, "we sometimes Seek God's will, desiring to know how to act in circumstances *in which it is not His wilt that we should be found at all* ; if conscience were in real healthful activity, its first effect would be to make us quit them. It is our own will which sets us there, and we would like, nevertheless, to enjoy the consolation of God's direction in a path which ourselves have chosen. such is a very common case. Be assured that, if we are near enough to God, we shall have no trouble to know His will.... However, 'if thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light' - whence it is certain that if the whole body is not full of light, the eye is not single. You will say, That is poor consolation. I answer, "It is a rich consolation for those whose sole desire is to have the eye single and to *walk with God.*" [See an admirable article in "The Present Testimony," January 1856, entitled, "How to know the Will of the Father." I cannot too highly recommend this paper to the attention of the Christian reader, it is deeply practical]