

Homiletics Analysis: 2 Corinthians 6

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Second Corinthians 6 falls within Paul's extended defense and exposition of apostolic ministry that dominates chapters 2–7. The chapter opens mid-argument from 5:20–21, where Paul has just issued the great appeal of reconciliation and announced the staggering exchange of Christ becoming sin so that sinners might become the righteousness of God. Chapter 6 then presses that proclamation into urgent, practical, and deeply personal territory across three movements.

The first movement (vv. 1–2) is an urgent appeal not to receive the grace of God in vain, grounded in a citation from Isaiah 49:8 — the day of salvation is *now*, and the Corinthians are being called to let the grace they have received actually do its work. The second movement (vv. 3–13) is Paul's extended catalogue of apostolic sufferings and commendations — one of three such catalogues in 2 Corinthians (cf. 4:8–12; 11:23–29) — in which Paul defends the authenticity of his ministry precisely through weakness, endurance, and paradox. The ministry is genuine not because it is impressive but because it has survived and served through everything that would destroy an impressive ministry. The third movement (vv. 14–7:1, with the chapter break falling mid-unit) opens with the sharp command: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers,” followed by a cascade of Old Testament citations calling the Corinthians to holiness of life as God's temple, God's people, God's sons and daughters.

This Text — Intent:

Paul is not merely defending himself or providing doctrinal information. He is pressing the Corinthians toward a full, uncompromised, wholehearted reception of the grace of God they have already been given. The danger in view is not unbelief — it is the half-life of belief, the tepid embrace of grace that honors Christ in name but withholds the heart, the affections, and the practical separateness that belonging to God demands. Paul's intent is to break through the Corinthians' guardedness toward him, to restore the relational and spiritual connection that their compromised entanglements have severed, and to call them to live as what they already are — the temple of the living God, the sons and daughters of the Almighty. God is seeking, through this chapter, to confront the soft syncretism and relational ambivalence of a church that has received grace but is not yet fully *living* from it.

Subject Sentence: Grace received must not be grace wasted — the day of salvation demands full-hearted response.

Primary Claim: God is pressing the Corinthians — and every recipient of His grace — not merely to possess salvation but to *inhabit* it: to open wide their hearts, to separate themselves from the entanglements that dilute their allegiance, and to live as those who actually belong to the living God. The grace that reconciled them is not a ceiling but a floor — and the question this chapter presses is whether they will let it be.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “unequally yoked” command (vv. 14–18) — scope and application:

This is the passage’s most debated section. Three main interpretive questions arise: (1) Does “unequally yoked with unbelievers” refer primarily to marriage, to business and civic partnerships, or to idolatrous cultic associations in Corinth? (2) Is the sharp break here a later interpolation (as some critical scholars argue), disrupting the flow from 6:13 to 7:2? (3) How absolute is the separation commanded?

On the interpolation question: the argument for disruption is weak. The thematic break is real but purposeful — Paul’s appeal to “open wide your hearts” (6:13) is followed immediately by the diagnosis of what is *preventing* that openness: entanglement with what is incompatible with the holy God who indwells them. The structural logic is: *receive grace fully* (vv. 1–2) → *the ministry that delivered this grace is authentic* (vv. 3–13) → *therefore open your hearts to us and to God* (v. 13) → *but you cannot open wide to us while you are narrowed by incompatible allegiances* (vv. 14–18) → *cleanse yourselves and make room* (7:1). The “disruption” is the point. This reading is preferred.

On the primary referent: a **Wesleyan/Arminian** reading tends to emphasize this text primarily as a call to personal holiness — the inward cleansing of 7:1 — which is not wrong but can underweight the social and relational dimension Paul has in mind. A **Baptist** reading, shaped by strong ecclesial separatism, has historically used this passage to support broad ecclesiastical separation from theologically compromised denominations or institutions, an application that has real warrant but goes beyond what the text directly addresses. A **Dispensational** reading sometimes flattens the Old Testament citations (vv. 16–18) as applying only to national Israel and then requiring re-application to the church, which underestimates the direct typological and covenantal logic Paul deploys — he is applying these texts *directly* to the church as God’s new covenant people, the temple of the living God.

The Reformed reading is preferred: the command addresses all covenantal partnerships — relational, vocational, cultic, commercial — that require sharing the yoke of life with those whose foundational allegiances are incompatible with belonging wholly to God. The

Corinthian context likely had idolatrous guild meals and commercial associations in view as the immediate occasion, but the principle is stated with the broadest possible scope through the OT citation chain. Marriage is not excluded (cf. 1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 11:2-3), but is not the exclusive or primary referent. The command is relational and covenantal, not merely behavioral, and its ground is not moralism but theology: *you are God's temple; God dwells in you; therefore what you yoke yourself to matters because it implicates the Holy One who lives in you.*

The authenticity of apostolic ministry through suffering (vv. 3–13):

Some **prosperity-gospel** adjacent readings treat the suffering catalogue as exceptional apostolic experience, not applicable to ordinary Christian life or ministry. This must be qualified: Paul's point is not to establish a universal suffering-norm but to demonstrate that the marks of authentic ministry are precisely opposite to what the Corinthians' "super-apostles" were offering. The **Lutheran** tradition rightly emphasizes the *theologia crucis* here — the cross-shaped pattern of authentic Christian ministry — and this contribution is worth retaining fully. The Reformed reading agrees: Paul's sufferings are not exceptional debris but paradigmatic display of how God's power works through weakness.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 49:8** (cited in v. 2): The Servant passage Paul quotes directly — “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Paul reads the Corinthians as standing in the moment Isaiah announced; the eschatological hour of God's favor has arrived in Christ and must not be squandered through indifference. This is the canonical anchor for the urgency of the whole chapter.
- **Leviticus 26:11–12; Ezekiel 37:27** (echoed in v. 16): “I will make my dwelling among them... I will be their God and they shall be my people.” Paul draws on the great covenant-dwelling promises to Israel to establish that the church is the fulfillment and embodiment of what Israel was called to be — the place where the living God takes up residence. The holiness demand flows from the indwelling presence.
- **2 Samuel 7:14; Isaiah 43:6; 52:11** (echoed in vv. 17–18): The Father/son language and the call to “come out from among them” — Paul weaves together the Davidic covenant, the Isaiah new exodus, and the priestly call to purity into a single appeal to covenant identity. The Corinthians are not merely being asked to behave differently; they are being reminded of *who they are* in the covenant.
- **Romans 8:15–17**: The “sons and daughters” language of 2 Corinthians 6:18 finds its fullest doctrinal elaboration in Romans 8 — adoption as the ground of both present holiness and eschatological hope. The familial identity Paul invokes is not

metaphorical encouragement; it is the ontological ground of the separation he commands.

- **1 Corinthians 6:19–20:** The nearest canonical parallel — “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit... you are not your own; you were bought with a price.” Paul’s temple-theology in 2 Corinthians 6 is not new to this letter; it is the consistent ground of his ethical appeals to Corinth, and the two passages mutually reinforce each other.

Aim: To press every reader past the merely notional reception of grace toward the wholehearted, separated, open-hearted life that belonging to the living God demands and makes possible.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
6:1	Paul identifies himself and his co-workers as God’s fellow workers, urging the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain	“In vain” (εἰς κενόν) — hollow, without effect; the danger is not losing grace but failing to let it accomplish its purpose
6:2	Citation of Isaiah 49:8 — the favorable time and day of salvation has now arrived; the moment of response is not later but now	The “now” (ἰδοὺ νῦν) is doubly emphatic — eschatological urgency; this is not merely Pauline rhetoric but prophetic fulfillment
6:3	Paul gives no offense in anything so that the ministry will not be discredited	Negative commendation — what Paul has <i>not</i> done; the ministry’s credibility is the issue
6:4–5	Positive commendation through hardship list: afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger	Three triads of suffering — external persecutions, physical deprivations, voluntary self-disciplines; all endured “as servants of God”
6:6–7a	Commendation through character and power: purity, knowledge, patience,	The shift from sufferings to virtues — the inner qualities sustaining the outer

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, the power of God	endurance
6:7b–8a	Weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left; through glory and dishonor, through slander and praise	Military imagery — Paul is fully armed; the paradox of honor/dishonor, slander/praise
6:8b–10	Seven paradoxes of apostolic existence: imposters/true; unknown/well-known; dying/alive; punished/not killed; sorrowful/rejoicing; poor/making many rich; having nothing/possessing everything	The rhetorical climax of the commendation — each paradox inverts worldly assessment; the real ministry is invisible to worldly eyes
6:11–12	Paul’s direct personal appeal: “Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.”	Sudden shift from catalogue to intimacy — Paul names them (“Corinthians”), exposes his own open heart, diagnoses their problem: <i>they</i> are withholding, not he
6:13	Appeal for reciprocal openness: “In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.”	“Widen” (πλατύνθητε) — the same root as “wide” in v. 11; the appeal is relational, not merely ethical
6:14	“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.”	The sharp command — agricultural/legal imagery; a yoke binds two to a common task and direction; incompatibility of fundamental allegiance is in view
6:14b–15	Four rhetorical questions establishing incompatibility: righteousness/lawlessness; light/darkness; Christ/Belial; believer/unbeliever	“Belial” — rare NT usage, a name for Satan/the evil one; the contrast is not cultural preference but cosmic allegiance
6:16a	Fifth question: “What	The theological ground is

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
6:16b	agreement has the temple of God with idols?” “For we are the temple of the living God” — grounded in Leviticus 26:11–12 and Ezekiel 37:27	introduced — identity, not merely ethics The foundational identity statement: the Corinthians are the dwelling place of the living God; this is not aspiration but description
6:17	Citation from Isaiah 52:11 and Ezekiel 20:34, 41 — “Come out from them and be separate... touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you”	The call to separation is the implication of the indwelling — not withdrawal from the world but refusal to be covenantally yoked to what is incompatible with God
6:18	Citation from 2 Samuel 7:14 and Isaiah 43:6 — “I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty”	The ultimate ground of the appeal — familial covenant identity; the separation is not from the world into a vacuum but from incompatible allegiances into the Father’s family

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	6:1–2	The Urgency: Do Not Receive Grace in Vain
2	6:3–10	The Authentication: Ministry Proved Through Paradox
3	6:11–13	The Appeal: Open Wide Your Hearts
4	6:14–16a	The Diagnosis: Incompatible Yokings Narrow the Heart
5	6:16b–18	The Ground: You Are God’s Temple, God’s Children

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Grace received must not be grace wasted — the day of salvation demands full-hearted response.

Primary Claim: God is pressing the Corinthians — and every recipient of His grace — not merely to possess salvation but to *inhabit* it: to open wide their hearts, to separate themselves from the entanglements that dilute their allegiance, and to live as those who actually belong to the living God. The grace that reconciled them is not a ceiling but a floor — and the question this chapter presses is whether they will let it be.

Applications (Five)

1. Stop treating grace as an achievement already reached rather than a life still being entered. (*Mind/belief*)

Paul's warning not to receive grace "in vain" (v. 1) addresses a specific spiritual failure: the person who has been genuinely saved but is coasting on a transaction they have already completed. Grace is not a box checked; it is a life inhabited. The Corinthians were in danger not of losing their salvation but of living as though salvation were a past event with no present claim on them. The call to "now is the day of salvation" is not evangelistic — it is pastoral. The person in the pew who has trusted Christ but whose heart is gradually narrowing, whose affections are drifting, whose engagement with God is becoming more formal and less inhabited, is exactly the target of this verse. The question is not "Are you saved?" but "Are you *living* in what you've been given?"

2. Learn to read authentic ministry by what it has endured rather than what it has achieved. (*Mind/belief*)

Paul's suffering catalogue (vv. 3–10) is a systematic inversion of every metric by which the Corinthians were evaluating their teachers. The false apostles offered them impressive presentation; Paul offers them a man who has been beaten, imprisoned, starved, and slandered — and is still standing, still joyful, still making them rich. The church that evaluates its preachers by their polish, platform, and success metrics is evaluating by Corinthian standards, not apostolic ones. The congregation that distrusts a faithful pastor because he lacks celebrity and favors the visiting speaker who seems more impressive has not learned what this text is teaching. Authentic ministry is authenticated through the cross-shaped pattern of endurance in weakness, not performance in strength.

3. Examine whether the allegiances and partnerships you have formed are narrowing your heart toward God rather than opening it. (*Will/behavior*)

The structural logic of the chapter is that the Corinthians cannot open wide their hearts to Paul (and through him, to God) because their hearts are already constricted by incompatible entanglements (vv. 12–14). The "unequally yoked" command is not first a prohibition — it is a diagnosis. The question for the believer today is not merely "Am I doing something wrong?" but "Is this partnership, this relationship, this professional or social commitment, requiring me to share a fundamental direction of life with someone whose deepest allegiances are incompatible with mine?" A business partnership, a romantic relationship, a social belonging, a professional identity — any of these can function as a yoke that drags the believer's affections in a direction incompatible with wholehearted belonging to God. The command is not to become a hermit; it is to refuse the kind of covenant-level entanglement that makes two people functionally one in direction when they are fundamentally incompatible in allegiance.

4. Let the identity “temple of the living God” function as a present, living description rather than an encouraging metaphor. (*Affections/worship*)

Paul does not say “you should be” the temple of the living God — he says “we *are*” (v. 16). The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is not a reward for holiness but the ground of it. Most believers treat temple-identity as an aspiration (“I should live more like God’s temple”). Paul treats it as an ontological statement that demands appropriate response (“since you *are* God’s temple, conduct yourself accordingly”). The affective register matters here: if the living God actually dwells in you — not metaphorically but really, by the Spirit — then the question of what you do with your body, your attention, your associations, and your affections is not primarily an ethical question. It is a question of whether you are treating the residence of the Holy One with the reverence that His actual presence demands. Sit with the reality of the indwelling. Let it produce awe before it produces behavior change.

5. Receive the Father’s “I will be a father to you” as the motivating ground of your holiness, not holiness as the ground of your acceptance. (*Affections/worship*)

The citation chain in vv. 16–18 ends not with a command but with a promise: “I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.” Paul does not close the argument with “therefore be holy so that God will accept you.” He closes with the covenant promise that is already in force — and the separation he commands flows *from* that sonship and daughtership, not toward it. The order is decisive: you are already His. You are already welcomed. The holiness Paul calls for is not the ladder to the Father’s house — it is the life appropriate to those already inside. The believer who is grinding toward holiness in order to earn acceptance has misread the chapter’s final move. You are being called to live *as* His son, *as* His daughter — which is a completely different motivational structure than living *to become* acceptable.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: This chapter teaches with great force that God’s grace is not passive — it is invasive, demanding, and transformative by nature. The same God who reconciles also indwells; the God who justifies also takes up residence. Paul’s temple theology (v. 16) is not a decorative theological flourish but the load-bearing ground of everything the chapter commands: if the living God actually dwells in His people, then the compatibility of their entanglements, the openness of their hearts, and the separateness of their allegiances are not merely ethical preferences but matters of theological consequence. The chapter also teaches the cross-shaped pattern of divine power — that God authenticates His work not through impressiveness but through the paradox of strength perfected in weakness, joy sustained through sorrow, and spiritual riches distributed through earthly poverty. The God of this chapter does not operate by worldly measures of success, and His servants should expect no different.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This chapter is a sustained display of what the Reformed tradition calls the *indicative grounding the imperative* — every command is grounded in a prior gift, and the gift is always the enabling ground of the command, never the reward for meeting it. “You are the temple of the living God” (indicative) grounds “do not be unequally yoked” (imperative). “I will be a father to you” (promise) grounds the call to cleanse ourselves from defilement (7:1, immediately following). The pattern is consistently Pauline and consistently Reformed: *be what you are*. This stands against every moralistic reading that treats the commands of the passage as rungs of a ladder toward acceptance rather than the appropriate expression of an acceptance already given. The Reformed tradition also finds here a strong confirmation of the perseverance and indwelling of the Spirit — Paul does not warn the Corinthians that the Spirit may depart if they are disobedient; he warns them not to live in a way that is incompatible with the Spirit’s actual, permanent presence. The call to separation from idols is not Old Covenant ethnic distinction but New Covenant covenantal holiness, fulfilled and internalized in the church as the embodiment of what Israel’s temple pointed toward.

Main Takeaway

The grace you have received is not a finished transaction — it is a life you are being called to fully inhabit. God has reconciled you, indwelt you, named you His son and daughter, and He is asking you directly: will you open wide your heart to Him? Stop narrowing it with yokings that drag you in incompatible directions. You are the temple of the living God — not as a goal to reach but as a reality to live from. Now is the day. Not tomorrow. Now.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating “do not be unequally yoked” as exclusively about marriage.** This is the most common decontextualization of vv. 14–18. While marriage is certainly within the scope of the principle, the text itself does not mention marriage, and the Corinthian context suggests commercial, social, and idolatrous cultic associations were the primary occasion. Preaching this text exclusively as a marriage text imports a significant narrowing that the passage does not warrant — and misses the broader structural point Paul is making about incompatible covenantal allegiances in any domain of life. The marriage application is legitimate but must not be allowed to crowd out the passage’s wider claim.
- **Preaching the suffering catalogue (vv. 3–10) as a badge of honor to aspire to rather than a theology of how God works.** The point of Paul’s catalogue is not to make his hearers feel guilty for their comfortable lives or to romanticize suffering. It is to demonstrate that God’s power and God’s authentication of ministry operates

through the cross-shaped pattern of weakness, paradox, and endurance — not through impressiveness. The application is not “you should suffer more” but “stop evaluating ministry by the criteria of worldly success.”

- **Using v. 2 (“now is the day of salvation”) as an evangelistic altar-call text in a context addressed to believers.** The verse is addressed to people who have already received grace — the warning is about receiving it *in vain*, not about receiving it for the first time. Using it as a conversion appeal is not wrong in itself (the logic extends), but it misses Paul’s pastoral target entirely: the danger of a Christianity that is nominally present but functionally hollow.
- **Separating vv. 14–18 from vv. 11–13 and losing the relational logic.** Paul’s command to separate from incompatible yokings comes immediately after his most personal, heart-exposed appeal to the Corinthians (“our heart is wide... widen your hearts also”). The connection is structural and intentional: the reason the Corinthians cannot open wide their hearts to Paul and to God is that their hearts are already yoked to things incompatible with that openness. Preaching vv. 14–18 as a freestanding ethical section without the relational logic of vv. 11–13 turns the passage into a rulebook rather than a pastoral appeal.
- **Reading the temple identity of v. 16 as aspirational rather than declarative.** “We are the temple of the living God” is a present-tense indicative, not a goal statement. Preaching it as “you should live like God’s temple” flips the logical order — the behavior flows from the identity, not toward it. The preacher must establish the identity first, let it land as a present reality, and then draw out its implications. Reversing the order produces moralism; maintaining it produces gospel-grounded holiness.
- **Failing to land the Father-language of v. 18 as the motivational ground of the whole appeal.** The citation chain in vv. 16–18 builds to its climax in the promise of filial relationship: “I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me.” If the preacher exhausts the text on the prohibitions and the separation commands without driving home the *reason* Paul grounds the appeal in Fatherhood — that we are not being called to holiness as orphans earning acceptance but as children already welcomed — the sermon will produce guilt rather than transformation. The chapter ends with the gospel. So should the sermon.