

## Concerning Divorce and Remarriage

Let's turn together to 1 Cor. 7 as we continue our study of the book of 1 Cor. in chapter 7 Paul addresses several issues related to marriage. Last week we looked at marriage and being single, and this morning we are going to consider what Paul says about divorce and remarriage.

I know that this can be a very sensitive and even painful subject for anyone who has gone through a divorce or separation, or has a loved one who gone through a divorce or separation. The Bible says that marriage is the union of two people into one flesh, and when that union is torn apart by divorce, hearts and lives and families are torn apart as well. So let me remind all of us right at the beginning that, no matter what your story is, the gospel of Jesus meets you in that story with a message of healing and hope. God can bring redemptive good out of bad when we bring our lives – the good, the bad, and the ugly – to Him, so let's pray together and ask for God's Spirit to minister life and grace to us as we study His word.

### 1 Cor. 7:10-16

As we looked at last week, there is reason to believe that a certain segment of the Corinthian church were looking down on marriage not only as unspiritual, but as a hindrance to their walk with God. One of the teachings that was gaining momentum at that time was that the material world is evil in God's sight, and only what is spiritual was good in God's sight. This led people to one of two extremes: it led some to believe that it didn't matter what they did with their bodies – they could sin as much as they wanted to – because it didn't touch their spirits and their bodies were evil anyway. And it led others to the opposite extreme of what is called ascetism – the pursuit of holiness by strict self-denial. And so in the hyper-spiritual atmosphere of the Corinthian church, some had come to the conclusion that marriage was for spiritual losers, that those on a higher spiritual plane, even if they were already married, wouldn't let the worldly desires and entanglements of married life slow them down. After all, the Bible says that this world is passing away and Jesus said that there is no marriage in the next world, so if you connect the dots just right you can come to the conclusion that those who are living in the realm of the next world now will be too heavenly minded to be limited by something as worldly as marriage.

Hyper-spirituality always does a number on marriages and families. Paul warned Timothy that in the last days demonically inspired teachers would, among other things, forbid marriage. I watched an interview with a man named Mike Rinder who wrote an expose on the church of Scientology, and his leaving the church cost him his family. He hasn't been allowed contact with his wife or children since he left the church. Marriages and families are often the victims of misguided, hyper-spiritual teachings.

And so in the hyper spiritual atmosphere of the Corinthian church, marriage is taking some direct hits: some were advocating for sexual abstinence in marriage. Others were making those who were single or engaged to be married feel like they'd be unspiritual and even sinning if they went ahead and got married, and some who are married are considering the option of divorce so that they can be free to follow Jesus better. And these are the issues they raise with Paul, and which he responds back.

And his response gives a lot of latitude for people to make different decisions about whether to get married or remain single, whether to press ahead with an engagement or call off the wedding. Like no other place in Paul's writings, he qualifies and balances what he says by making it clear where he is just sharing his opinion. He says things like, *this isn't a command... here's what I say (I, not the Lord)... concerning the engaged, I don't have a command from the Lord but I'll give my opinion...* The tenor of most of the chapter is, you can do this, or you can do that and do well either way. You are free to get

married, and you're free not to. The person who gets married does well, and the person who remains single does even better (remember Paul is an avid celibate!). The point is, there's grace for people to make different decisions to the glory of God.

The exception to this grace-to-make-different-decisions tone are these verses discussing divorce. Here there are no qualifiers and no latitude for differences because Paul is drawing from the authoritative teachings on marriage and divorce of our Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in several of the gospels. Since Paul is drawing from our Lord's teachings, let's turn together to Matt. 19:3 to read his words.

*3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." 7 They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" 8 He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."*

Paul first applies Jesus' teaching to a marriage between two believers and then he applies it to a marriage where one is a believer and the other is not and I want us to look at those two points and then, folding Paul's teaching in with Jesus' teaching on the subject, I want to ask the question: *are there times when divorce and remarriage are acceptable options in the eyes of God for the believer?*

### **1. When Christians marry, it should be until death do them part**

*To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. (vs. 10-11)*

This of course is God's ideal for all marriages, Christians or not, but Paul is narrowing the discussion to when two people who are followers of Jesus get married. And what he says is, for Christians, divorce is not an option. The idea is that two people who call Jesus Lord will be able to work through any difficulty as they both seek to submit to Jesus' will for their lives rather than insist on their own wills being done.

But with this strong stand Paul extends grace for some serious bumps in the marriage: *The wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband)*. Paul understands that Christians can hit really rough patches in their marriage to the point that they may even need to separate from each other for a time. In that case, they're not trapped by an unyielding command. They shouldn't separate, but if they need to, they should remain unmarried and work towards reconciliation.

Grace is powerful in our lives, but it isn't always polished. God isn't interested in us trying to always look like we've got everything together, He's interested in doing a real work in us so that we really are becoming more like Jesus, even if it's slow and messy and imperfect. I know many Christians who have genuine, healthy marriages and I want to learn from them, but for me to trust that their marriages are genuine and worth learning from, they need to be honest about their imperfections and failings. I want to see the power of grace in their lives, not the polish of image control.

Real believers go through real hard times, and Christian couples need to work through hard challenges and arguments and bitterness and all kinds of other junk just like any other marriage. In extreme cases a Christian marriage might reach a point where separation might be the best answer for a time. But if Jesus is truly the Lord of both their lives, Paul says that they should use that separation to be working towards reconciliation. God's ideal for Christian marriages is that they be until death do them part.

## **2. Believers who are married to unbelievers should be 100% committed to that marriage**

Paul brings up a dynamic that Jesus didn't specifically address: when one person in a marriage is a follower of Jesus and the other person isn't. Paul's counsel to the believer is to remain in the marriage. In today's culture, where a lot of people identify themselves as Christians simply because they aren't Jewish, Moslem, or Buddhists, and they go to church once in a while, and maybe even wear a necklace with a cross on it, this may not seem like a really big deal, but when you consider that the biblical definition of a Christian is a man or woman who has surrendered their lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and committed themselves to follow him all the days of their lives, this can have a really huge effect on a marriage. When Corinthians who had been leading a very pagan, very sinful, very idol-worshipping lifestyle had an experience with the living God and turned in repentance to faith in Christ, it was like they became a different person, and if their husband or wife didn't turn to Christ with them, it had the potential of creating a huge challenge for both of them. The unbeliever still worships pagan gods and sees sexual debauchery as a family value. And what about the children? The newly Christian parent is understandably concerned about that child growing up under pagan influences.

Paul gives an answer that is a 180 degrees opposite from Mike Rinder's experience where he was cut off from his family because he left the Scientology church. Paul tells the believer to stay 100% committed to the marriage. If the unbeliever is willing to stay in the marriage then you should stay in the marriage. And who knows? God might use you to lead them to Christ! Then there's this strange statement: *For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. (vs. 14)*

This is an important paradigm shift in the NT. In the OT, you could get unholy real quick by touching the wrong thing or being near the wrong person. Don't touch a leper or you'll be unclean. Don't touch a woman who is bleeding or you'll be unclean. But Jesus' holiness wasn't a negative charge holiness – it was a positive charge holiness. It went out from him and cleansed the uncleanness of the leper. It went out from him and healed the bleeding infirmity the woman had suffered from for 12 years. It went out from him and transformed the lives of sinners like prostitutes and liars and cheats, and none of the "uncleanness" flowed back to defile him. It's like light and darkness. Paul is saying that there is a positive charge holiness in the life of a believer and they don't need to live in fear of the power and grace of God in their homes and their children being overcome by the power of the pagan beliefs.

So remain 100% committed to the marriage. Love your unbelieving spouse, respect him or her, build a great marriage together, and be the best Christian witness you can be. Maybe the Lord will use your witness to lead him or her to a faith in Christ. You never know. But what if the unbelieving spouse wants out of the marriage? What is the obligation of the believer in that case?

That brings us to the question:

### **3. Are there times when divorce and remarriage is an acceptable option for the believer?**

This question is a more controversial and less settled question to believers. Honest and sincere believers can and do differ about it, and I am going to share with you what my position is, based on my understanding of these passages and other bible passages.

We live in a broken world and I think that in this fallen world the Lord gives believers two legitimate reasons for divorce. The first is, as Jesus says in Matthew 19 (and also in Matthew 5) when one spouse commits “sexual immorality”. The Greek word used is “porneia” from which we get the word “pornography”. Porneia is a word that encompasses a broad range of sexual immorality and as such I think it includes the many shapes that marital adultery can take. Because repeated sexual immorality breaks the vows of marriage, I believe it gives the sinned against person the ability to acknowledge the reality of the other person’s having shattered the wedding vows.

The other reason is found here in 1 Cor. 7:15. If an unbelieving spouse refuses to live with a believing spouse, Paul says “let it be so”. The believing wife or husband is not bound. God calls us to peace. I think what Paul is saying here is, if an unbeliever wants a divorce, you can work to try to save your marriage and in that sense “fight” for your marriage, but don’t be contentious about it. Don’t turn it into a bitter and acrimonious fight, before that happens allow them to sever the marriage and depart.

I think these two reasons, sexual immorality and an unbelieving spouse departing, flow from the same root issue: the abandonment of the marriage vows on the part of a spouse. Whether it be through flagrant and unrepented sexual sin, or by divorce, the one spouse is violating the marriage vows and in God’s mercy and grace, He allows the innocent party to be free from bondage to a violated and broken marriage. And, in my opinion, that includes freedom to remarry.

So when Jesus says, *except for immorality*, I don’t think he has in mind that if one spouse or the other slips up and falls morally, that the marriage is over. I know of so many marriages that have a tender, gracious testimony of forgiveness and redemption when one spouse has fallen, but has fully and wholeheartedly repented of it. Rather than the end of the marriage, God can turn what is very bad into something very good. It’s what He does!

But I know of spouses who have been abandoned by their partner, often for another person, and the marriage vows lie tattered and broken by those actions. People often quote the verse “God hates divorce” as if what He hates is the divorce papers being signed. But the verse that contains that phrase is in Malachi chapter 2:

*And this second thing you do. You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. 14 But you say, “Why does he not?” Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. 15 Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. 16 “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.” Mal 2:13-16*

God is speaking to the man (or woman) who stops loving their spouse and abandons them. This isn't a condemnation in any way of the one left behind but only of the one doing the leaving. There are real victims of divorce and they need to know that God is an advocate for them, not an accuser of them.

Paul broadens that principle and adds that if an unbeliever chooses to abandon the marriage, the believing spouse isn't bound to vows that the other one has shattered. I know some will disagree with me on this, but I think this principle applies to the person who shatters the vows but doesn't leave the home. The man who abuses his wife or the wife who flagrantly violates the marriage. I'm not saying that if a husband is inconsiderate or unkind at times that the wife is justified to leave him, but if there is truly ongoing abuse that is a vow-shattering, marriage breaking practice. The Lord equates the man who doesn't love his wife and divorces her with the man who covers his garment with violence. Things that do violence to a marriage, without repentance, shatter the marriage, whether there is a signed paper or not. They actually didn't have all the legal procedures back then that we have now. They just handed them a notice of divorce and it was over.

Maybe this hits close to home for you. Maybe you or someone close to you has experienced a painful divorce. Whatever your story, God's grace can meet you there. But you need to be honest about what your role is and was:

- Innocent victim – God has comfort and healing for you. He speaks hope to your future. It might be that God will change your spouse and heal the marriage. As you seek Him, He will provide all that you need for a full and joyous life. And maybe He has someone else in mind – only it has to be someone who has a strong faith in the Lord!
- Maybe you betrayed your marriage vows. You had a hard heart and messed the marriage up. God has grace for you as well. It's called the grace of repentance. Turning from that heart-hardening sin and asking God to give you a soft and tender heart in its place. It might be too late for that marriage, it might not be. But it's never too late for God to redeem bad for good.
- Most were probably co-contributors. God has grace for you. Grace to become more like Jesus going forward. Ask God to forgive you for your sinful contribution, if there is opportunity to go back and own your part, do so. And then press on in Christ free from condemnation by the power of forgiveness and grace.
- If you're in the midst of a divorce or separation, be honest with the Lord and yourself about which category you're in. Marriage is never meant to be severed. God meant it to be until death severs the tie. If you can, through repentance, forgiveness, counsel, and patience, save the marriage, I urge you to do so.

Here's what I want you to hear: no matter what it looked like (or looks like), there's mercy, grace, and hope in Christ for you!