

## **What About Divorce? 1 Corinthians 7:10-16**

This morning as we continue our series on 1 Corinthians, we get to the subject of marriage and divorce. Marriage is a wonderful gift from God that provides countless blessings for families and society, but marriage isn't always easy. Within every marriage there are some unique challenges because of sin and because of the differences between the husband and wife that often lead to tension and conflict.

There are no perfectly compatible married couples out there. And God made it that way. It's one of the ways he shapes and refines us to become more like Christ. None of us gets a spouse that gives us all we want and need all the time, so there's always tension to some degree. And in many cases that tension leads to unhappiness and unfulfillment in marriage. We start to feel disappointed and empty. We start to think it would be better if things were different – if they were different. Maybe it would be better if you weren't married anymore, or found a different spouse that fits you better?

There are a wide array of issues and many marriages end up in some kind of separation and divorce. It's very common in our culture, when people aren't happy, to get a divorce in order to try a different direction.

How are Christians supposed to deal with this trend? Because Christian marriages have problems too. There's conflict, unhappiness, and unfulfillment. And when you're surrounded with a culture of divorce and try again, it can become appealing to think that way too.

Divorce and separation were a common part of the Corinthian culture and the people in the church had some questions about it. Is it ok for Christians to get divorced like everyone else? How about when a person becomes a Christian and their spouse does not? Should the Christian seek separation or divorce from the unbeliever in that situation? In our passage for today, Paul deals with answering those questions. His teaching provides some general guidelines for the people in Corinth to follow that we can learn from as well.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

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

In the church in Corinth, there were two common situations involving marriage that people found themselves in. Some were married in the church and were both Christians, which is who these verses were written to. Others had been married outside the church as unbelievers and one of them had since become a Christian while their spouse remained an unbeliever. The next few verses speak to them. In both cases, they had questions about divorce.

Here, Paul addresses Christian married couples who were considering divorce. His use of words suggests that in that culture, when it was the woman considering divorce, she would have to separate herself and depart from her husband and home. And when it was the man, he would send his wife away. In either case, they are moving toward divorce – not some other option of separation like we have today – just so we don't get confused about the word "separate." Paul doesn't give any context for why these Christian couples would be considering divorce. The only thing we know is that for some reason, one spouse is considering it and I'm assuming some kind of conflict is going on.

Paul's general, straightforward teaching for Christians considering divorce is that they shouldn't do it. They shouldn't imitate the practices of their culture where divorce was common. They should be different. They should seek to keep the marriage together. And if a Christian had already gone forward with a divorce, they should remain unmarried or be reconciled to their spouse.

Paul is relaying the teaching he heard that came from the Lord. The gospels record a couple statements Jesus made about divorce. One is in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:31-32: *"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'* <sup>32</sup> *But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."*

The other is Matthew 19:3-9: *"And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?'"* <sup>4</sup> *He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and*

*female,<sup>5</sup> 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'?<sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."<sup>7</sup> They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."*

So Jesus elevated the importance of staying married far above the current cultural practices in Israel. They were getting divorced for many reasons and felt justified as long as they did it in the legal way, but Jesus showed them very clearly that such an idea was not good and not of God. He points out the covenant relationship and binding union between a husband and wife that was meant to be in place until one spouse died. He also points out that the practice of divorce did not come from God, but from man, nor was it commanded by God, but only allowed by Moses because of hardness of heart, or sin. So divorce was not to be a regular practice and anyone who divorced their spouse and married another, except for sexual immorality, was committing adultery.

So, in writing to Christian married couples in Corinth, Paul summarizes Jesus' teaching.

The question that needs asking at this point is: Did Jesus or Paul intend these few verses to be a universal teaching about every situation involving divorce? In other words, did Jesus and Paul intend to say that divorce was prohibited in every situation no matter what is going on in the marriage? Is that God's will regarding the issue of divorce?

The reason I ask is because sometimes marriages – even Christian marriages – end up in situations that are very damaging or dangerous for one of the spouses because of the sins of the other spouse. Is divorce ever an option in those kinds of situations? We know that God does not want us to get divorced to deal with the problems and conflict that are inevitable in marriage, but does he forbid divorce in every situation?

A lot of people believe he does. A lot of people believe that Jesus and Paul's intent was the universal prohibition of divorce in every situation. Therefore, spouses in damaging and dangerous marriage situations where their spouse is repeatedly and unrepentantly sinning against them and hurting them must stay in them. And if they get a divorce they are sinning against God. If they ever get remarried, they are committing adultery. There's unforgiveness, guilt and shame. People have been removed or barred from church membership because of this. People have been rejected by fellow Christians or family members. Not only have they had to deal with a horrible marriage situation, but they also have to deal with rejection from what is supposed to be their Christian network of support. There is very little if any grace or forgiveness extended to those who have been divorced. They have crossed the line. There's something about divorce that puts it into a higher degree of sin for some people.

Divorce is extremely painful – in every situation. It involves the tearing apart of a union that was meant to last until death and the tearing apart of families. Not only do the spouses suffer, but the children suffer as well – deeply. They seem like they might be ok at the time, but it is deeply painful. So divorce should never be treated lightly. But does that mean it should be absolutely prohibited in every situation and treated as an unpardonable sin?

You may have noticed a little phrase in Jesus' teaching about divorce. It doesn't pop up in the parallel passages in other gospel accounts, but Matthew, who is known for paying more attention to details, includes it in both of his: "except for sexual immorality." So there is an indication that Jesus himself did not intend for the prohibition of divorce to apply to every situation. He taught that when divorce took place because of sexual immorality, there was an exception. I believe he had ongoing and unrepentant sexual immorality in mind rather than a 'one strike and you're out' mentality, but he did allow for an exception. In Paul's teaching that comes right after the verses we're looking at, he makes it clear that if an unbeliever wants to divorce a Christian spouse, the Christian must let it be so. So Paul includes another exception.

In Ezra 10, when it was found out that the Israelites had intermarried with foreign idol worshippers it was decided by their spiritual leaders that the best solution for them would be to divorce their foreign spouses and send them away so that their sin would not lead the Israelites astray. So we have another exception.

So I take these exceptions to mean that sometimes there are exceptions... Every marriage situation is different and even though God does not want us to get divorced there are some exceptions where divorce may need to happen as a last resort. Therefore, I don't think that Jesus or Paul intended for their teaching to be a universal prohibition of divorce. I believe it was meant to give a general understanding of God's will concerning divorce, with the realization that because of sin within marriage there are some exceptions.

So divorce should not be practiced among God's people, however, the biblical examples suggest that if there is a situation where one spouse is repeatedly and unrepentantly sinning against another spouse and putting them in a damaging or dangerous situation, whether that be sexual immorality, abandonment, pagan idolatry, or something else, that spouse is permitted to divorce as a mercy – a necessary concession that should be last resort.

Those decisions are very complicated and deeply personal between that person and God and they will have to answer to him, so we should extend grace and point them to seek God's will in prayer. It would be different if someone was planning to get a divorce because they had an ongoing personality clash or something with their spouse that was making them unhappy. We should exhort them to stay married and work out their differences and support them in that. But in dangerous or damaging situations where all attempts at repentance and reconciliation have failed, I believe we have to take a different approach. Each situation should be treated carefully and prayerfully to try to determine God's will.

So we've seen Paul's answers to Christian married couples; he then moves on to address the questions about divorce from those who had been married outside the church in a pagan union, but had since become a Christian while their spouse remained an unbeliever – should they get a divorce?

My assumption is that the story I mentioned of the Israelites divorcing their pagan spouses was in mind. In that case, it was believed that the idol-worshipping spouses would lead the people of Israel astray, so in order to not go down that road, they divorced them and sent them away. The people in the church in Corinth were in a similar situation – having converted to Christ, some of them

found themselves in marriages with unbelieving idol-worshippers. Should they divorce them so that they wouldn't have their pagan influence in their lives and home?

Read 1 Corinthians 7:12-14.

*To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. <sup>13</sup> If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. <sup>14</sup> 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.*

So Paul's instruction is that they don't divorce their unbelieving spouses, as long as they consent to live with them. Paul indicates that Jesus didn't teach about this situation, so this is coming directly from him. And the reason Paul gives for why they shouldn't divorce them is so that they would have a godly influence on their pagan spouse and the children. Rather than fearing the pagan influence of an unbelieving spouse and ending the marriage, they were to let their light shine to influence them.

The way Paul says it can be confusing, because it might sound like the unbelieving spouse is saved because of being married to a Christian and the children will be saved because of the presence of a believing parent. But those ideas contradict the rest of Scripture. The Bible is clear that people are saved through their own faith and personal union with Jesus Christ, not that of a spouse or parent. An unbelieving person will not be saved by association with a believing spouse or parent. That's not what Paul is trying to say.

The word "holy" that is used has different meanings and the one used here is that of being "set apart." When a Christian husband or wife is present in the home, they receive many blessings through their relationship with God, and those blessings spill over to the other people in the home. It may be blessings of greater peace and harmony, wisdom and joy, a way of living that produces good fruit for all to enjoy rather than destruction. And they are a constant beacon of light, pointing their family members toward the saving grace of Jesus. So by virtue of being in the same home as a believer, the unbelieving spouse along with the children are set apart to receive the overflow of God's blessings. If the Christian

would divorce their spouse and leave the home to avoid any pagan influence, they would remove that blessing from their family. So Paul says, “If your unbelieving spouse consents to live with you, you should not get divorced.”

But what if they don't consent to live with you? What should you do then? That's where Paul finishes up this passage.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:15-16.

*But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. <sup>16</sup> For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

So this is a case where Paul allows for divorce. If you're married to an unbeliever and they want to divorce you, let it be so. You are not enslaved – you are no longer bound by the covenant and are free to go. In fact, you should allow it to happen for the sake of peace. You shouldn't fight them on it. You shouldn't try to force the marriage to continue in an effort to save your spouse because you don't know if that's what God will do.

Some of us are in similar marriages where we find ourselves married to an unbeliever. You might have both been unbelievers when you got married and you became a Christian and they did not. You might have knowingly married an unbeliever even though you were a believer. You might have married someone you thought was a Christian, but who has since turned away from the Lord. Whatever the situation is, they don't share the same faith, goals, and values as you do, and they are living like a pagan to some degree. Should you divorce them to eliminate their unbelieving influence in your life? Should you seek to find a Christian spouse with whom you would hope to find greater joy and fulfillment in life?

Paul says “No.” If they consent to live with you, don't divorce them. Let God bless and influence them through you. If it becomes a damaging and dangerous situation, it may be different, but if not, stay in the marriage. If they want to end it and are set in their heart that they no longer want to be married to you, in that case, let it be. Don't fight the divorce to try to save them. Release them to God.

These are Paul's instructions about divorce for the people in Corinth, and we can apply them to our lives as well. I have dealt with a lot of people in very difficult marriage situations and every single one is different and needs much wisdom and discernment. I would caution all of us to use great patience and humility before God when considering our own marriage situations and when providing counsel to others. A lot of bad decisions have been made by Christians and a lot of bad counsel has been given. Marriage and divorce are far too complicated and serious to make rash or flippant decisions and judgments.

I encourage you most of all, if you're married, to pursue a healthy growing relationship with your spouse whether they're a believer or an unbeliever. You will have differences and conflict because that's normal, but look at those as opportunities for you to grow and become more like Christ. Work through your differences, seek to honor Christ in how you treat one another. And if you find yourself in a desperate situation, seek help and godly counsel. Don't go through it alone. Ask a trusted friend to pray for you. Talk to one of the pastors to help you discern God's will.