

WHAT ABOUT DIVORCE?

1 Corinthians 7:10-16

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We are all aware of the statistics of divorce in recent years. Regardless of what source you look at, the numbers are staggering. While some have a divorce rate of 50% (1 of every 2 marriages ending in divorce), a comparison of statistics shows a more realistic percentage of 35% (1 out of every 3). The disconcerting truth is that the likelihood of divorce between professing Christians is the same as that of non-Christians. While multiple divorces (those of a second or third marriage) are much higher among unbelievers (60-70%), according to George Barna the figure is still nearly one-quarter (23%) for married Christians that divorce two or more times (www.barna.org). I guess we Baptists can take some consolation in these numbers. A decade ago, Baptists led in divorce by percentage among evangelicals. Today, Pentecostals have that dubious distinction (44%, or nearly half of the 35%) and, in case you are interested, Presbyterians have the lowest percentage (28%, or roughly one-third of the 35%).

The question begs to be asked, “How can this be?” Given the fact that evangelicals today preach against divorce and continue to dissuade congregants from divorce, the numbers continue to echo that of the world. One reason for this is that people do not have a biblical view of marriage. Marriage is no longer a sacred institution of God but a relationship entered into for every reason other than to reflect the glory of God and His gospel. Another reason is a lack of church discipline when it comes to divorce that is not permitted in Scripture. One of the speakers at the 2000 SBC in Atlanta spoke on the importance of a biblically grounded, Christ-centered marriage and received amen after amen from the pastors in the crowd. However, when he dealt with divorce and the lack of church discipline it, suddenly you could have heard a pin drop in the Georgia Dome. The result of this is that believers often have a casual attitude towards marriage and an even more cavalier attitude towards divorce. Both marriage and divorce are focused on self and what makes one happy or brings the most satisfaction at that moment. Our churches have allowed this quasi-utilitarian approach to both marriage and divorce. However, in our text this morning, Paul reiterates *the gospel-oriented significance of the institution of marriage*.

I. Marriage between Believers (7:10-11)

In these verses Paul gives instruction for marriage between two believers. As I was preparing for this text, I noticed that most commentators agree that Paul is addressing two believers, but I struggled as to how they came to this conclusion. As we will see in a moment, Paul plainly addresses the marriage of a believer to an unbeliever in vv. 12-16. But it is not as plain in these verses that he is addressing the marriage union between believers. However, I think John MacArthur is correct in his assertion that both partners of the marriage in view here were believers is clear from Paul’s giving them **“instructions”** (which, MacArthur says, he never gave to unbelievers) (*1 Corinthians*, 165). So we see in vv. 10-11 Paul’s admonition to believers in marriage.

Paul begins this passage with a distinction, **“But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord.”** Later, in v. 12, he addresses those he calls **“the rest”** in another way, **“I say, not the Lord.”** What does Paul mean by this distinction? He certainly does not mean that what he says in vv. 12ff is not the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God. Paul does not simply offer an uninspired opinion in those verses. He always spoke with apostolic authority. All that

he wrote and all that was written by others was inspired by the Holy Spirit as the very Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16). In this text he is merely distinguishing between what Jesus Himself had commanded or instructed, either when He was on this earth or elsewhere in Scripture, and what had not been taught by the Lord or instructed elsewhere. In other words, the distinction is between the instruction from the law of God and that which had been revealed to him by the Spirit. Both are the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God. Here he deals with what the Lord had instructed concerning divorce.

1. What the Lord instructed

Matthew 5:31-32 – then only in the case of adultery

Matthew 19:5-8 – Pharisees testing Jesus on Moses permission of divorce in Deuteronomy 24. Jesus response to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.”

Mark 10:2-12 combines these two

Malachi 2:16 – God hates divorce. It is, as John MacArthur points out, “contrary to God’s plan for mankind” (*1 Corinthians*, 165).

2. What Paul instructs

We cannot be certain as to the reason some of the Corinthians wanted to divorce their spouse. As we saw last week, some Corinthian Christians had given a vow of celibacy or abstinence within the marriage union, thinking that this made them more holy. They made abstinence to be a right of purification. It is this misguided practice that Paul rebuked in vv. 2-5. Some took this practice of celibacy so seriously that they wanted a divorce to help them with their vow. Some perhaps wanted a divorce because they saw someone else more desirable. Others may have wanted to separate because they were not fulfilled in their relationship—their needs, whether emotional or physical, were not being met. Regardless of their reason for seeking a divorce, it fell outside of what was allowable by Moses and permitted by Christ, that is, adultery.

What was Paul’s instruction in this case? “**The wife should not leave her husband**” and “**the husband should not divorce his wife.**” Much has been made concerning Paul’s choice of words “**leave**” or “**separate**” and “**divorce**” as if Paul is setting up two different scenarios or is saying one thing to the wife and another to the husband. But in Paul’s day, to separate was to divorce. The words were used interchangeably. Paul forbids both actions. So Paul is addressing the divorce of two believers for reasons other than the permission of adultery and his counsel is for them to stay married. In doing this, Paul lays down an important principle regarding divorce.

There are many reasons given today when two believers divorce outside of the biblical permission of adultery. The leading reason is perhaps *irreconcilable differences*. This is offered as a legal ground for divorce in most states and has been defined by one state as “those grounds which are determined by the court to be substantial reasons for not continuing the marriage and which make it appear that the marriage should be dissolved” (North Dakota, <http://www.legis.nd.gov/cencode/t14c05.pdf>).

Closely related to irreconcilable differences are the reasons of *incompatibility* (“We don’t have anything in common: goals, values, hobbies, joys, etc.), and *inaffection* (no longer love one another).

Another reason given for divorce is as follows: “It is better for the children that we divorce lest they suffer the pain of living in a home with so much discord and so lacking in love.” Sam Storms offers a thought-provoking response to this reason.

- a) Let’s ask the kids which one *they* prefer!
- b) Is it *really* better for the kids? Certainly parental discord is damaging to children. But it can’t begin to compare with the destructive effects of the loss of a father or mother from the home through divorce.
- c) To say it is better for the children if the parents (sic) divorce *poses a false dilemma*. It assumes there are only two options, either divorce or the status quo. Since the latter is considered intolerable and therefore unthinkable, divorce seems like the only way out. The third option of restoration of the relationship between husband and wife seems like a utopian dream that people with any degree of common sense would never consider.
- d) This argument is blatantly hypocritical. They try to justify their decision to divorce based on their love for their kids. But if people really cared all that much about their children they would move mountains to do whatever necessary to heal the relationship. They’re not getting divorced because they love their kids. They’re divorcing because they selfishly love themselves. This is little more than an act of selfishness disguised as a noble act of self-sacrifice for the good of the children.

[<http://samstorms.com/article2.asp?id=185>].

Others attempt to spiritualize or justify their actions for divorce. It goes something like this, “This divorce is God’s will. I know it is because I prayed about it and God gave me a real peace in my heart.” Some of you may recall the divorce of a Christian recording artist and remarriage to a well-known country singer in 1998. Prior to the divorce, she is quoted as telling her pastors and her then-husband, “I believe and trust that I have been released from this [marriage]. And I say that knowing that even the Bible says the heart is deceitful.” She further explained how she knew this was God’s will, and “to the best of my level of peace, I had a very settled, unshakable feeling about the path that I was going to follow.”

(www.family.org/cforum/citizenmag/coverstory/a0011624.cfm)

All of these reasons, just like the reasons of those in Corinth, are rebuked by Paul. You see, Paul wants us to remember the message we are sending to an unbelieving world when we who call ourselves Christians do not demonstrate it by our actions, especially as it relates to the God-ordained institution of marriage, marriage which is defined by Scripture as being indissoluble. Who are we, who claim to have been reconciled to a holy God through the body and blood of Christ, to dissolve a marriage with the claim of irreconcilable differences? What are we saying when we say we are no longer compatible? Is it possible for those that are truly in union with Christ to be incompatible with Him? How does one “fall out of love” in a marriage that is rooted in Christ’s love for His church? Can Christ ever stop loving His church and dissolve His relationship with His bride? Does God speak out of both sides of His mouth concerning His will for marriage? Would He ever reverse Himself as it relates to a case of private, subjective revelation? The answer to all of these is, NEVER! Kent Hughes spells out the importance of Paul’s message:

Christian divorce *lies* about Christ and the church. Christ and his bride will never be separated. Christ loved the church as his own body and gave himself for her. His marriage to the church is eternal. And this is what the world needs to see in our relationships. How can we have a message to the world when we lead the way in divorce? [Kent Hughes, *Set Apart: Calling a Worldly Church to a Godly Life*, 121]

Paul gives two legitimate actions for these illegitimate divorces. One, “**remain unmarried**” or two, “**be reconciled.**” Paul’s advice to those who are married, stay married. For those who have separated or divorced illegitimately, remain unmarried or be reconciled. Any other action would be adultery. His reason is that in the eyes of the Lord, these two are still married, “one flesh.” The sanctity of marriage was at stake. As Calvin plainly wrote,

For it [marriage] is an agreement that is consecrated by the name of God, which does not stand or fall according to the inclination of men, so as to be made void whenever we may choose...Those who are connected by marriage are no longer free, so as to be at liberty, if they change their mind, to *break in pieces the pledge* and go each of them elsewhere in quest of a new connection. [*Calvin’s Commentaries: 1 Corinthians*, 239]

So we see Paul’s words on marriage and divorce between two believers.

II. Marriage between a Believer and an Unbeliever (7:12-16)

As I mentioned earlier, “**I say, not the Lord**” is more than simply a sanctified opinion. What follows is the inspired Word of God with the force of apostolic authority. Therefore, it is to be obeyed just as any other part of Scripture. Paul is merely addressing an issue that Jesus or Scripture had not previously addressed, in this case the marriage of a believer and an unbeliever.

Before looking at Paul’s counsel, we should recognize how this situation came about. Paul is not sanctioning the marriage of a believer to an unbeliever. Paul addresses this in 7:39 where he writes that a woman “is free to be married to whom she wishes, *only in the Lord,*” and more directly in 2 Corinthians 6:14, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers.” Paul is not talking about *getting* married. He is talking about the case of an *existing* marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. This could happen when two unbelievers are married and one of them comes to faith in Christ (which was probably common during this time of the early church in its gospel infancy) or when two professing believers are married and one apostatizes the faith. These are “**the rest**” that Paul gives counsel in these verses.

1. The counsel when the unbeliever stays (vv. 12-14)

Paul’s position is rather straightforward. Believing spouses should not divorce their unbelieving spouses so long as they “**consent to live with**” them. Evidently there were some in Corinth that were divorcing unbelieving spouses as they saw fit according to the Old Testament. In Ezra we read of those who had been unfaithful in marrying foreign women and who had succumbed to their idolatry. These were commanded by Ezra to take an oath to “put away all the wives and children...and let it be done according to the law” (Ezra 10:2-3). So some at Corinth sought divorce, sought to “put away” the unbelieving spouse. However, this was not comparing apples to apples. In Ezra, and other places where Israel is commanded to put away their wives, the people had disobeyed God in marrying these pagans and sinned in not heeding God’s express command concerning intermarriage in Deuteronomy 7:3-4. Therefore, to be reconciled to God

meant to put away these wives and all things associated with them. These at Corinth were not in the same situation. They had not sinned in getting married, nor was it a sin for them to remain married to the unbelieving spouse when they became a Christian. Paul's counsel is for them to remain together, not separate. The believer should not be the one to initiate divorce.

Paul gives a further reason for this counsel in v. 14. There were those that had a genuine concern that their marriage would be defiled by the unbelieving spouse. But Paul writes to the contrary, **“The unbelieving husband is sanctified through the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband.”** What does Paul mean by **“sanctified”**? In this case, **“sanctified”** does not mean morally sanctified, but it means **“set apart.”** **“Set apart”** for what? John Murray is helpful here. In his book, *Divorce*, Murray states:

It should be recognized that the sanctification of which Paul here speaks cannot be the sanctification of regeneration (the new birth) and actual salvation...The sanctification of which Paul speaks, therefore, must be the sanctification of privilege, connection, and relationship. This fact, however, should not lead us to depreciate the significance of the kind of sanctification expressed. Though not tantamount to actual salvation, this sanctification is, nevertheless, beneficent (sic) and gracious in character; it is a blessing accruing from the grace resident in the covenant of representative principle. And though this blessing does not in and of itself bring salvation, yet it places the person who is the beneficiary of it in the channel of saving grace, in a position of close proximity to the saving grace of God and therefore in a position of peculiar advantage. [John Murray, *Divorce*]

John MacArthur furthers this interpretation:

The sanctification is matrimonial and familial, not personal and spiritual. In God's eyes a home is set apart for Himself when the husband, wife, or, by implication, any other family member is a Christian. Such a home is not Christian in the full sense, but it is immeasurably superior to one that is totally unbelieving...One Christian in a home graces the entire home. God's indwelling that believer and all the blessings and graces that flow into the believer's life from heaven will spill over to enrich all who are near. [*1 Corinthians*, 166]

Paul then interjects the children of this marriage to reinforce his argument, **“for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.”** Just as the believing spouse is not defiled or polluted by the unbelieving spouse, neither are the children. They are not **“unclean”** but **“holy.”** Again, **“holy”** here means, **“set apart.”** In other words, they also are in a better position, they have a peculiar advantage as Murray put it, to hear the gospel and see the gospel lived out in the life of the believing parent. Paul's point is that the believing spouse who lives their life according to the Word of God has a faith that is contagious!

2. The counsel when the unbeliever leaves (vv. 15-16)

Paul now turns to the other possibility in a mixed marriage, when the unbelieving spouse is unwilling to stay. The emphasis here is that the initiative rests with the unbeliever. If he or she desires a divorce, then the believing spouse really has no option because **“God has called us to peace.”** In other words, God wants the believer to live in peace. Paul understood the stress and tension that this situation presented and his counsel was **“let him leave.”** As Curtis Vaughan rightly suggests, **“To cling to a marriage which one partner is determined to end would lead to**

nothing but frustration and strife” (*1 Corinthians*, 76). **“Let him leave”** is not a permission, but a command because peace in this case would be practically impossible. However, as Roger Ellsworth is quick to point out, this does not allow one to use this as a blanket justification for any and every divorce. Paul is not advising divorce any time our personal peace is disturbed in marriage (*Strengthening Christ’s Church*, 122). The context of Paul’s counsel is an unbeliever initiating divorce.

Paul further states that the believing spouse **“is not under bondage in such cases.”** In other words, they are free to remarry. The marriage is dissolved in God’s eyes. I respectfully disagree with those that teach that remarriage is never an option for those who have been divorced. I agree with John MacArthur, “Throughout Scripture, whenever legitimate divorce occurs, remarriage is assumed. Where divorce is permitted, remarriage is permitted” (*1 Corinthians*, 167).

Paul concludes his counsel when an unbeliever is unwilling to remain with the questions, **“For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?”** As long as the unbelieving spouse is willing to remain, then the prospect of salvation is greater. But when they are unwilling, the prospect is greatly minimized, regardless of the believing spouses hopes. The believer simply has no guaranty that by remaining in this situation the unbeliever will come to faith in Christ. As Leon Morris rightly concludes, “To cling to a marriage which the pagan is determined to end would inevitably lead to frustration and tension. The certain strain is not justified by the uncertain result. *Marriage should not be seen simply as an instrument of evangelism.* The guiding principle must be ‘peace’ [*TNTC: 1 Corinthians*, 108, emphasis mine]. Paul’s counsel in this situation **“Let them go.”**

Conclusion

1. Adultery is the only permissible reason for divorce between believers. While desertion or abandonment is held by some to be admissible for divorce, I see no scriptural warrant for this in the case of two believers. Nowhere in Scripture do we find this permission. The permission by Paul concerning desertion is in the case of a believer and an unbeliever, not two believers. Perhaps this is why the Westminster Confession of Faith lists only adultery as an occasion for divorce and remarriage (WCF 24.5).

Of course, the question then is, “What if a believing spouse deserts?” Then I believe we take the biblical steps of church discipline spelled out in Matthew 18:15-17. The same could be said of spousal abuse, financial neglect, alcoholism and/or drug abuse and any number of the “what if?” situations that are often interjected at this point. If a believer is acting like an unbeliever, then the Bible is plain on how discipline is to be carried out.

2. Forgiveness and grace in divorce. Given our cultural situation, I would assume that we all have been affected by divorce in some way. Perhaps you have gone through a divorce. If you divorced on unbiblical grounds, then you are to repent. There is forgiveness with the Lord. This is not a license to live how you want to live but a reminder that there is forgiveness in the Lord.

You might be the child whose parents divorced. Statistics show that the children of divorce are more likely to divorce and have more socioeconomic problems than those who come from a

home where a godly marriage is maintained. However, God's grace is sufficient to overcome any statistic. I am walking, talking proof of that!

3. Divorce is permitted, not prescribed. It is allowable, not commanded. God hates divorce and every effort by His grace should be made to keep marriage together. But you are not to feel guilty in these situations where you have no control in divorce, whether it is from adultery or abandonment.

Conversely, we must be careful that we do not read too much into what Paul says here. It is wrong to assume that because we have successfully avoided divorce in our marriage that our marriage is healthy. That would be to exceed what is written. But that is a subject for another sermon.