

Marriage: How Permanent is It?

1 Corinthians 7:10-16

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I am not sure if you've noticed, but 1 Corinthians is not the easiest book to teach through; particularly chapter 7, which starts off on the subject of sex in marriage, then whether singles should marry or not, and now this week on whether married folks should stay married or not.

If it sounds like I am pleading for some compassion, I am! Still, one of our core values at Bethel is that the entire Bible is inspired by God which means we can't duck the hard passages because they are uncomfortable or politically incorrect. So let's allow God's Word to speak today on the subject of marriage and divorce. As we look at it, we need to do so wiping tears from our hearts for all the pain and devastation that divorce represents. Among our church family are people we love who may or may not have approached this biblically in their past. We need a biblical view of divorce and remarriage AND forgiveness and redemption.

Remember that Paul is doing a Q and A with the Corinthian Christians. The Corinthians wrote a letter with questions for the Apostle. If he took them in order, the first questions they had were about marriage, sexuality, and divorce. Why? This is where the proverbial rubber meets the road; where our faith both guides and shapes or it doesn't. It is also where the effects of the Fall are felt most painfully and personally. Married Christians are still sinners and no matter how godly they are, marriage is hard and making marriage work is a great act of faith. Complicating the situation in Corinth was some number of people in the church who had responded to the gospel but their spouses had not. What were they to do? Was divorce an option for them or not?

Are Married Christian Couples Allowed to Divorce?

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. (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

Right away we see that Paul is saying something radical to our modern day sensibilities. It is quite common in our culture for a marriage to split up, even common in the church. The Barna group conducted a study a year ago that showed a national average of 33% of marriages ending in divorce. The percentage among evangelical Christians was only slightly lower than the national average. He comments, "There no longer seems to be much of a stigma attached to divorce; it is now seen as an unavoidable rite of passage... Interviews with young adults suggest that they want their initial marriage to last, but are not particularly optimistic about that possibility. There is also evidence that many young people are moving toward embracing the idea of serial marriage, in which a person gets married two or three times, seeking a different partner for each phase of their adult life." (George Barna. www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released)

We live in a no-fault divorce culture. Lest you think this is only a recent phenomenon, it was actually easier to divorce in the Greco-Roman world than it is for us. We have to go through

all the legal proceedings and endless paperwork. Back then you may have it recorded with the state but most of them were just a matter of walking away, which commonly happened.

Paul first addresses the “the married.” These are married Christian couples in the church. There is a potentially confusing phrase, *Not I, but the Lord* – What does that mean? He has a few more in this chapter like in verse 12, *I, not the Lord* – what is he differentiating? Realize that when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, none of the gospels were written yet. He couldn’t prove text what he was saying, (“as Mark 11:10 says”). There was no Mark or Matthew or John. Yet what Jesus taught was repeated and proclaimed by the Apostles. “Not I, but the Lord” means that Paul is quoting Jesus on the subject. In verse 12, “I, not the Lord” means he doesn’t have a direct teaching of Jesus on the matter but he still speaks with authority as an apostle.

So what did Jesus say about the permanence of marriage? Let’s look at Matthew 19:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 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’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let not man separate.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” 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. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” (Matthew 19:3-9)

It would be easy to think that in the first century everybody was married and stayed married. Not at all. Divorce was very common in Jesus’ day. There was huge debate about one verse in the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 24:1, which said that a man could divorce his wife if he found anything “indecent” in her. What does indecent mean?

The liberal position (Hillel)

The liberal school of Hillel interpreted *indecent* in the widest possible manner and extended the meaning to all kinds of real or imagined offenses including:

- Walking about with her hair down
- Speaking to men on the street
- Speaking disrespectfully of her husband’s parents in his presence
- Even an improperly cooked meal

In other words, a man could divorce his wife for any reason that *he* deemed “indecent.”

The conservative position (Shammai)

Shammai taught that it was offenses of marital impropriety short of adultery. It certainly could mean adultery, but the punishment for adultery was death. So you didn’t have to say adultery, the solution there was not divorce, but death. The man had all the control. A wife couldn’t divorce her husband for any reason.

Jesus’ response goes back to God’s plan for permanence in marriage when He established marriage in Genesis 2. Note the plan for permanence. One man, one wife. One life. In marriage, the two are one and they are so by divine decree. *What therefore God has joined*

together, let not man separate (Matthew 19:6). So God's plan for marriage was permanence. The Pharisees respond quickly because they know Jesus is taking a very strict line. *What about Deuteronomy 24 where Moses said we could divorce?* Jesus' response is that Moses permitted it because of the harsh realities of life after the Fall (hardness of hearts). Deuteronomy 24 was there to regulate divorce, not to encourage it or promote it.

Why does God value permanence and, according to Malachi 2:16, hate divorce? Marriage was created to picture the Trinity's relationships with one another AND Christ's relationship with the church (Ephesians 5). Would God the Father ever divorce God the Son? Would Jesus ever divorce His Church? The questions are absurd because of the eternal permanence of the love within the Godhead AND the love of Christ for the Church. God values permanence in marriage because the realities they picture are sacred and enduring. So Jesus takes a strict line and says, if anyone divorces and remarries except because of marital unfaithfulness, they are committing adultery with their new spouse.

This is the teaching Paul is referring to in 1 Corinthians 7:10. They should not divorce. If they do, they should remain unmarried or be reconciled to their ex-spouse. We'll talk more on this at the end.

What About Those Married to Unbelievers?

This was a difficult issue when the Church began because as the gospel spread throughout the world, often one spouse would receive it and would one reject it. So there were many Christians who were married to unbelievers. Imagine what it is like to suddenly find yourself married to a Christian. Real salvation is transformational. The spouse feels like they are married to a different person with different priorities than they ever had before. Often they are not excited about it and wonder what happened to the spouse they married. *What has gotten into you?*

What should the Christian spouse do in this situation? Stay? Leave? Separate? Divorce? The Corinthians wanted to know.

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. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 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. (1 Corinthians 7:12-14)

Paul teaches here that it depends on the desires of the unbelieving spouse. If they want to stay married, then the Christian spouse is to remain and not divorce (verses 12-13). Paul gives two reasons for staying:

For the spiritual influence on the unbelieving spouse

For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. (Verse 14)

How is an unbelieving spouse "made holy"? This is another example of the need to interpret the Bible with the Bible. *Made holy* cannot mean that the unbelieving spouse is in a state of salvation because of the believing spouse. The rest of Scripture testifies that we are saved by our faith, not the faith of our spouse or parents or children. Saving faith is personal and individual. The sense of it is that the marriage puts the unbelieving spouse under the

compelling influence of the gospel lived out through the believing spouse. 1 Peter 3:1 describes it as winning the spouse over without words. Living with a Christian can be a compelling witness to them and may lead them to saving faith.

For the spiritual influence on the children

Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. (Verse 14)

They are holy, not in the sense of being saved, but they are up close and personal every day with the gospel on display in mom or dad. This is the way it's supposed to work and parents, you could ask yourself what your kids are seeing in you day-to-day that would point them to Christ.

If the believing spouse left the marriage, the children would not have a source of truth and teaching in their lives that would point them to a Savior who died for them. There are many in this very situation. They are married, but they are spiritually single parents. Most often it seems to be mom. Spiritually, dad's not in the picture.

Praise God for faithful moms who are committed to spiritually influencing their children. We have many in our church and if there is a verse for you to cling to, here it is. You exert a powerful influence for the gospel on your children. One godly parent is sufficient for an enormous influence toward Christianity.

I saw this growing up. My two best friends were Matt Hundley and Brian Woodbury. For both Matt and Brian, neither of their dads was spiritually there. Also in both cases, their moms taught them Bible verses and hauled them to AWANA and youth ministry stuff. Was it easy? No. But both Matt and Brian embraced Christianity, and today, Brian serves faithfully in a church in the Minneapolis area and Matt pastors a church in Albert Lea, Minnesota. How did that happen? God. But it was God working through a faithful Christian mom who didn't run away, but lived out the gospel day in and day out in front of her kids.

What if the unbelieving spouse wants out?

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. (Verse 15)

This is an important verse in the marriage, divorce, and remarriage discussion. It hinges on what is meant by "enslaved." Also translated "under bondage" (NASB), or "bound" (NIV). Enslaved or bound to what?

Now we are back on the question of whether marriage is permanent or not. Clearly it is by design. However, in the complexities of a fallen world, God has given three circumstances which potentially put a spouse in a position of being free from their marital obligation to reflect the permanence of Christ's love for the church.

Three Circumstances that Free a Spouse from their Marital Obligation

The Death of a Spouse (1 Corinthians 7:39)

This is pretty obvious, but clear teaching requires that we mention that a widow or widower is free to remarry if they so choose.

Adultery (Matthew 5:32; 19:9)

We already read this passage but Jesus says, *And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.*"

Why would divorce and remarriage be allowed for adultery? Remember a few messages ago, sex is a unity. By sexual union, adultery brings a third person into the marriage. This is such a distortion of the picture that God allows the victim spouse the option to divorce and remarry. I want to emphasize this is only an option. I'd call it Option B. Option A is an extraordinary display of the gospel toward the offending spouse. This is conditioned on the offending spouse's repentance and desire to reconcile. I have seen some amazing grace moments between spouses. I remember a friend of mine whose wife was away on a corporate junket and cheated on him. They sought to reconcile and he said to me, "God has forgiven me SO much, how can I not forgive her?" Wow. That's Plan A. But should the victim spouse so choose, divorce is allowed and remarriage.

Abandonment by an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:12-16)

When an unbelieving spouse abandons the marriage, God has called us to peace. The spouse should let him or her go. They are not bound to the marital vows anymore and are free to consider remarriage in the future. This raises more questions than I have time to address today so hold your horses. We will get to some of them in a future message.

Here's the big picture for today. If these are the only three reasons that a marriage can be dissolved, what should that tell us about how permanent marriage is in God's eyes? *What God has brought together, let no man separate.* This was a radical teaching in the first century and it's a radical teaching today. What we ought to take from this is that marriage is more than a piece of paper, more than a pretty ceremony, more than cohabitation by a man and a woman. It is sacred; divinely ordained and defined. God treasures marriage. God's people must as well. Would your spouse say yes to this? Husbands, is your marriage and your wife sacred to you? Wives, is your marriage and your husband sacred to you? Your marriage in many ways is your belief statement. It reveals the spiritual condition of the heart. A successful marriage is much more than merely staying married, it is expressing to an unbelieving spouse, and children, and extended family, and neighbors, the reality of a risen Savior and the difference He makes in your life.

Let me finish with two stories. We have a family in our church who are the only apparent Christians in their entire family. In their near immediate family, there have been a combined 30 divorces. This couple has been married for over 20 years. Guess what they get asked all the time from their family? *How do you do it?* Their answer? *This is what Jesus does in your life.* Permanence is powerful.

Second story: I remember early in my ministry at Bethel getting a call that the husband of a dear, elderly woman in our church was dying of emphysema. They wondered if I would go talk to him in the hospital before he died. I didn't know him, but I said I would. This man was intellectual, accomplished, and a skeptic of religion. So I went into the hospital room and there was this man on the bed. He was wearing an oxygen mask and breathing with difficulty. Next to him was his elderly wife, a member of our church, holding and stroking his hand.

So I started by making some small talk. He cut me off and very gruffly said, "Pastor, if you have something to say, say it and be done because I have to go to the bathroom." I don't normally respond this way, but he kind of made me mad. I rose from my chair and got right

in his face and said, "Well, let me tell you something, you are about to die and apart from faith in Jesus Christ, you are going to hell. You can deny the reality of it to me but you cannot deny the reality of it in your wife." And there she was, still stroking his hand. As I pointed my finger at him, his face contorted with anger, but when I said, "You cannot deny it in your wife," his face softened, and he looked at her, and I'll never forget what he said, "Yep, you're right, she's one fine cookie."

There is power in permanence. Marriage is for permanence and when the gospel shapes a marriage of two Christians or a Christian married to an unbeliever, it speaks eloquently of the reality of a risen Savior. "Could we ask you, how have you made your marriage work all these years?" "It's not us. It is Jesus at work in us and in our marriage that has made all the difference, let us tell you about it." Permanence is powerful and God delights to see His faithfulness displayed in a faithful spouse and marriage. We'll talk more about this in two weeks.

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