

What Needs to Change is Me

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

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Let me first say thank you for a chance to catch my breath in July. I have heard pastoral ministry compared to logging in which the logger has to take time to sharpen the blade. You can cut with a dull blade, but it is exhausting. Preaching is like that. My blade could use some attention. I will be taking some vacation time in July. The rest of the time I look forward to sharpening the blade with reading, reflecting, and planning. I am hoping to meet with some pastors for encouragement and advice.

I am also kicking off something new. I have started a blog. A blog is a kind of online journal. My blog is linked through our church website or you can go there directly at www.stevedewitt.wordpress.com. For our church family, this is a way for me to communicate with you beyond just the sermon. I have restaurant and menu suggestions which 12 years of living as a bachelor in Northwest Indiana uniquely qualify me to make. I even have some favorite recipes. So it's a serious site and a fun site. I'd encourage you to check it out and keep up with it in July as I'll be posting updates.

As we work our way through 1 Corinthians, we have spent the last few weeks in chapter 7 dealing with sex in marriage, singleness, and most recently divorce and remarriage. I'll not review everything as we don't have time. On the subject of marriage, Paul emphasizes the importance of its permanence. Jesus' teaching on it also emphasized permanence: What God has joined together let not man separate. So we summarized the teaching of Scripture; Permanence is the goal and in only three situations are divorce and/or remarriage allowed. The first is pretty obvious. The *death of a spouse* frees the living spouse from the obligations of the marriage and frees them to consider remarriage. The second is *adultery*; in which case the victim spouse CAN but doesn't have to divorce. Option A is always the application of the gospel in forgiveness and reconciliation. The third is from 1 Corinthians 7:15, *the abandonment by an unbeliever*.

The point of our last message was that if these are the only three reasons, permanence in marriage is a big deal to God. How we view marriage and the difficulties it creates in a fallen world will tell us whether we are approaching it from a God-centered or me-centered perspective. If it's me than I am in as long as my needs are met, as long as I "feel" in love. If my marriage is about God, now I have a totally different perspective, one that can weather the storms of marriage in a fallen world. This leaves some questions hanging in the air and for the sake of clarity, I'd like to address a few of them.

Answering Some Tough Questions about Divorce and Remarriage

What if it was my sin that caused the divorce?

Do with this sin what we should do with all sin. Repent, confess it to God and those you wronged, and seek to reconcile with your ex-spouse. Remain unmarried while reconciliation is possible with your ex-spouse. In situations where reconciliation is not possible (i.e. the ex-spouse has died or remarried), after a genuine repentance, you are free to remarry.

What should I do if I married an unbeliever?

Confess that sin to the Lord and ask for His forgiveness. Then, because divorcing an unbelieving spouse that is willing to remain with you is wrong, remain with your spouse and be the very best witness to the gospel in the home that you can be.

What about "abuse" as a reason to divorce?

This is a difficult question and heartbreaking reality in our world. Complicating even talking about it is the fuzzy nature of the word "abuse" itself. I have heard it used in many different ways; some legitimate, some not, in my opinion. Questions surround it of kind, frequency, level of danger, involvement of children, and all the rest. What do we do with this?

While the Bible categorically condemns abuse against one another in all forms, it doesn't speak to it specifically in the discussion on divorce. If you can find the verse, let me know. That said, clearly abuse is both a civil and church issue. If there is physical violence in the home, call the civil authorities. They are here by God's design for our protection and no one should be subject to that ever. If this is a pattern and the abusive spouse is not a Christian, I see room for 1 Corinthians 7:15 applying. His/her actions are making it clear that he/she does not desire to live with you as a husband/wife. Similarly, even if the spouse claims to be a Christian, this kind of behavior would argue against it and his/her claim to being a follower of Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 7:15 may still apply. The church has a role in either disciplining the abuser or adjudicating the situation and the applicability of 1 Corinthians 7:15.

These are extremely difficult and every situation is unique. They require great wisdom and discernment and I would encourage you to not go through this alone but to let the church do what it can to provide an umbrella of protection for you.

What if I unbiblically divorced in the past?

Confess that as sin to the Lord, ask His forgiveness and seek to be reconciled to your spouse if that is possible.

What if I unbiblically divorced in the past and married someone else?

Confess that as sin to the Lord, ask His forgiveness, and now be the very best Christian spouse that you can be. To divorce your second spouse would be a sin.

What if I married someone whose first divorce was unbiblical?

In other words, I now realize that I should not have married my spouse. There is no sin that cannot be forgiven. Confess that as sin to the Lord, ask His forgiveness, and then be the very best Christian spouse that you can be. Pray that your spouse would repent of his/her first divorce, and like you, determine from that point on to fulfill God's design for marriage in every way.

If you are saying, "Wow, this is really complicated!" There is a reason why. Sin complicates life. Whenever we depart from God's design, it's like trying to put shattered glass back together. It can be done by God's grace, yet it's very difficult. While there are no guarantees, this is a call to wisdom in who you marry. Is he or she a godly Christian committed to God's design for marriage? Are they vow-keepers? How do they resolve conflict? Can they forgive? These are so much more important than how she looks and

whether he is a stud muffin or not. Ladies, better to marry the pencil-necked geek who loves God than the muscle-head who doesn't. Men, better to marry a God-loving, Christ-worshipping average looking woman than the goddess who doesn't. The better the Christian, the better the spouse. The better the spouse, the better the marriage.

Married couples, this has profound implications for you too. If the more Christ-like your spouse is, the better spouse to you he or she is, then what should you be trying to promote in your spouse? What should you pray for in them? What kind of things should you be involved in as a couple? What should you focus on in your own life? Christianity touches and transforms every aspect of life including the kind of spouse I am and the kind of spouse my spouse is. Give attention and time to the things that promote spiritual growth and you will find your marriage enriched as a result.

If I were to ask you, what in your life does God want to change, what would you say? What do you think needs to change?

Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God. (1 Corinthians 7:17-24)

This would seem to be a digression from this whole section on marriage, singleness, and divorce. But remember to whom Paul is writing. The prevailing belief in the church in Corinth was that one had to be single and/or sexless to be spiritual. So the married Christians were longing to be single because they thought their marital status was what God wanted to change. The single Christians were struggling with sexual desire and wanting to be married and wondering if they should. They thought their singleness was what God really wanted to change. Paul brings up four other groups: Jews (verse 18), Gentiles (verse 18), slaves (verse 21) and freedmen (verse 22). The Jewish Christians viewed their circumcision as regrettable now that they understood that salvation is by faith. There was a procedure available in the day that could hide that. The Gentile Christians read the Old Testament and wondered if God wanted them to be circumcised. The Christians who were slaves thought they needed to be free to serve God.

Paul is trying to counteract a very common but misguided perspective on the Christian life; what God wants to change is my circumstances. For me to really be spiritual, I need a different life context. So the married think they need to be single. The single think they need to be married. The Jews think they need to be circumcisionally Gentile. The Gentiles think they need to be circumcisionally Jews. The slaves need to be free. The free need to be slaves. And Paul just wants to scream and say, *Stop! People, we're not getting it. Circumstances are not what needs to change; what needs to change is me.*

The way Paul screams in Scripture is that he repeats for the sake of emphasis. In this passage he repeats in verses: 17, 20 and 24:

- *Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. (Verse 17)*
- *Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. (Verse 20)*
- *So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God. (Verse 24)*

Verse 17 is the key here. *Let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.* The lives we are living are by divine assignment and calling. Behind our marriages and singleness and religious background and economic situation is a sovereign God. He is the one who assigns and calls. Since God is the one who placed us in the circumstances we are in, His purpose is not to change our circumstances but to change us *IN* the circumstances. Change us into what? Change us into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.* (Romans 8:29) Christian change is primarily inward on the heart and attitude level. Think about that a moment. Are my desires for change the same as God's? Listen to our prayers. Don't most of our prayers have to do with change? But what are we asking God to change? Mostly the outward. Change my health, change my job, change my relationships, change my economic situation, and change my life into circumstances that I want. Our prayers are about change, but so often not the change that God wants. We want God to change our spouse, job, family, living situation, and location. God wants to change our pride, selfishness, judgmental spirit, priorities and passions. God can and sometimes does change our circumstances. But that is always secondary. He wants our heart, our obedience (verse 19), and our trust in Him.

Let's apply 1 Corinthians 7:17-24. As we consider this passage, it really is a radical change in perspective on our lives. This is the change of the new life in Christ.

We are New Creations; Everything has Changed

The gospel transforms how I look at myself

Don't most people find their identity in outward circumstances? What do I look like? What is my vocation? Am I single? Am I married? To whom am I married? Do I have children? What is my ethnic background? What is my social status? The outward indications of status including job titles, money, and the things money can buy define people in our world. Think about the week we came out of. Three deaths were noted: Michael Jackson, Farrah Fawcett and Ed Thomas. Michael Jackson was the most famous entertainer in the world. Farrah Fawcett was a sex symbol. Ed Thomas helped turn boys to men by coaching them about football and life in Parkersburg, Iowa. Two were defined by the outward and one by the inward. I have family connections to Coach Ed Thomas. The comment made about him is that all the good things you hear about him are true. He was a Christian man and elder in his church.

How do we define people and how we define greatness?

Christianity offers salvation and transformation by faith in Christ irrespective of social status and wealth and education. It transcends all these definitions and categories. Now in Christ, *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3:28) In other words, these old self-definitions don't apply anymore. I am who I am in relationship to God through Jesus Christ. The gospel transcends these definitions. I am who I am in Christ and the change I really want is inward likeness to Him.

The gospel transforms how I look at my past

The Corinthians were perpetually whining, *If only I had _____* (married, not married, been circumcised, not been, etc). Are you like that? If only I had gone to college. If only I had married Joey from high school. If only I had not married Joey from high school. If only I had made a different decision. If only, if only, if only; constantly second-guessing the past and dissatisfied with the present. 1 Corinthians 7 has something to say to you. *Stop it! You are where you are because a sovereign God put you there.*

Paul is telling the Christians that the key to making their present situation count is to let God change them daily, right there where he has placed them. (Prior, 1 Corinthians, p. 130)

This is the old principle, "Bloom where you're planted." Married. Single. Rich. Poor. Whatever. The outward doesn't define you, your relationship with Christ does. Your heart, your love and your service of God. This is what matters to God.

So quit second-guessing what got you into that marriage or job or house or whatever. God's sovereign and what He primarily wants is NOT to change our circumstances but to change our hearts. Pray for that inward and then see if God chooses to change the outward as well.

The gospel changes how I find contentment

The world searches for contentment in outward circumstances. What's the problem with that? Life is constantly changing and is utterly uncertain. My circumstances cannot be where I derive peace and contentment. It'll never work and don't forget that death looms for us all. Circumstances cannot provide the contentment we want.

But Christianity does, not by changing our circumstances, but by changing us in them! The single Christian sees singleness as a part of God's good plan for their life today. The woman married to an unbeliever sees that marriage is the context to live out the gospel. The person struggling with health issues sees that disease is his opportunity to glorify God in it. All the outward categories no longer define us nor do we look to them for peace. Instead, they are the context God is using to transform my heart and my desire and my priorities and my goals. He is making me like His Son and followers of Jesus get excited about that. How does this happen?

Like many, I have been pondering the Michael Jackson story. I was in high school when he was at his peak and I and all my friends thought he was really cool. I got thinking about his song, *Man in the Mirror*. Listen to what he says in the lyric. Then listen to the radically different source of contentment in the lyric of *In Christ Alone* (next page):

*I'm Gonna Make A Change,
For Once In My Life
It's Gonna Feel Real Good,
Gonna Make A Difference
Gonna Make It Right . . .*

*I'm Starting With The Man In The Mirror
I'm Asking Him To Change His Ways
And No Message Could Have Been Any Clearer
If You Wanna Make The World A Better Place
Take A Look At Yourself, And
Then Make A Change
(Na Na Na, Na Na Na, Na Na,Na Nah)*

Man in the Mirror. Written and composed by
Siedah Garrett and Glen Ballard.
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*No guilt in life, no fear in death—
This is the pow'r of Christ in me;
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No pow'r of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand;
Till He returns or calls me home—
Here in the pow'r of Christ I'll stand.*

In Christ Alone. Words and Music by
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Music.

We cannot do it on our own. God the Holy Spirit is sanctifying us. And what a difference it makes when I am not trying to self-generate change and self-produce hope.

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