

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Advice About Marriage I Corinthians 7:8-24

"I want out!" "Out of what," I replied? "I want out of my marriage of ten years," the woman replied. "Why do you want out?" I asked. She said, "My husband is not a Christian, well, he professes, but he doesn't act like a Christian; we have nothing in common." I asked her, "What grounds do you have for divorce?" She replied, "Incompatibility." And I said, "That is not a biblical grounds for divorce." She became quite defensive but after a while admitted she married her husband knowing full well he was not a spiritual man and there was some question about his salvation. Yet, he had a good job, a good salary and good looks. Now, ten years and three children later she was miserable. This scenario can be repeated multiple thousands of times over and could have been avoided had biblical principles been applied before marriage. But now, the situation is still salvageable if biblical principles will be applied.

Is it ever right for a Christian to get a divorce? For that matter, is it ever right for anyone, Christian or non-Christian to get a divorce? If divorce is permitted, is it ever right to remarry? In I Corinthians seven, the Apostle Paul gives advice on one aspect of divorce and remarriage -- the relationship of a Christian who is married to a non-Christian. He is not giving a full systematic theology on divorce and remarriage but is addressing a particular problem in the Corinthian local church. We also will only briefly touch on what the Lord Jesus taught about divorce, so I may not satisfy all your questions on this touchy subject. Divorce and remarriage is a controversial issue, and if we could get twenty-five of the best Christian scholars together to discuss this subject, we would have twenty-six different opinions. No matter what is taught in this sermon, I'm sure there will be some who do not agree. Let's learn to agree to disagree, and to love and respect one another even when we do not see eye to eye.

Christians who live in America are faced with tremendous pressures from the world on the subject of divorce. Statistics are staggering. Until just recently, two out of three marriages in the USA ended in divorce. The latest statistics is that the divorce rate is leveling off, but there is a reason for it. One of the reasons is that more and more people are not getting married but are just living with one another, so there are fewer and fewer divorces. It is obvious that our non-Christian culture in America accepts divorce as a practical solution to solving complex marital problems. The tragedy is even Christians are getting divorces at an alarming rate, and these divorces occur when biblical principles are either unknown, ignored or openly violated. The institution of marriage is being threatened with non-existence (or reinterpretation to make it politically correct), and people are hurting, so they take the easy road out and break up a marriage rather than endure the pain and grief of an unhappy one. Someone has said jokingly, "Compared with marriage, being born is a mere episode of life, and dying is a trivial incident." These are crucial days for Christians and we must, as never before, place our beliefs on the

Word of God, so we will not be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. Christians must insist any teaching on divorce and remarriage be grounded in the Bible and that a Christian ethic be accepted at all costs. If we do this, whatever position we take on divorce will not cause us to win a popularity contest. It is time for pastors and Christian workers to speak out on this subject because many a divorced person is grinding out his or her life under an enormous load of unnecessary guilt. Surely divorce is sin and any person who has gone through a divorce has paid a horrible, painful price. But divorce is like any other sin; it can be forgiven. Yet we must remember God said in Malachi 2:16, "I hate divorce." Therefore, whatever we teach on divorce and remarriage, we must see there will always be some stigma attached when a person is divorced and yet, at the same time, we should assure the divorcee God is merciful and compassionate, forgiving every sin.

What is happening in America today was happening in Corinth two thousand years ago. While divorce was rare in the first century Jewish community, it was an everyday occurrence among pagan Greeks and Romans.

"Divorce in the first century was even more common than today. One first-century historian writes that people got married for the purpose of getting a divorce, and got divorced for the purpose of getting married again, it was not uncommon for a person to have been divorced and remarried several different times" (Knofel Staton, I Corinthians).

The Apostle Paul clearly understood the ins and outs of divorce and the pressures the unsaved world places on the church in social issues. Some of these Corinthian Christians were looking for easy ways to get out of difficult marriages, and Paul condemns this attitude as carnal reasoning.

ADVICE TO THE UNMARRIED AND WIDOWS 7:8-9

Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: These Corinthians had written a letter to Paul asking him questions about marriage. These questions arose because there were some who were giving a twisted and perverted view of celibacy. They were teaching that marriage was a moral evil in contrast to the single state. They really believed celibacy was a morally superior position and that the truly spiritual people in the local church would not get married. So the whole congregation was being challenged as to whether it was right to get married or to stay married. Paul addresses first the unmarried and widows. This probably refers to people who were widows and widowers, but it may include all unmarried, even divorcees. It seems, however, to be dealing primarily with people who were once married and no longer are for whatever reason.

It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. Paul thought it was honorable if they could stay single after being married. He was able to do this. Apparently God is able to give the gift of staying single to some after they have been married. If a person can stay single after the death of a mate or a divorce, this is good, honorable and OK with God, and no person should be looked down upon because of this position. Part of staying single is to keep oneself sexually pure.

But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. If a widow, widower or divorcee is not able to control his or her sex drive, it is advisable to marry. Paul is talking about "burning with passion," not burning in hell. If a person has been married but because of death or divorce has lost a mate and the sex drive has been awakened and there are sexual needs to be met, it is OK to get married.

The Bible always stresses morality, it is never right to have an affair to satisfy sex drives. The Bible says that morality is to be maintained in the marriage relationship alone. Any sexual activity outside of marriage is sin. I believe this applies to young people in love as well. If two people love each other, yet financially are not in a position to get married, or if they have college before them, or some other barrier is standing in their way, then it is better to get married than enter into premarital sex. In marriage they can honor God, but in premarital sex they honor no one. Parents must be careful not to drive their child to premarital sex because they demand him or her to get through college before they marry. Wise parents will seek to give their child sound advice and encouragement not to marry but to control the sex drives, or if this seems impossible, to cool the relationship for awhile. If the child is going to get involved in premarital sex, then parents should encourage marriage and help all they can with moral and financial support through college. Anything is better than breaking God's moral law in premarital sex. Notice, however, Paul suggests it is better if a single person stays single for in so doing he or she can give themselves more fully to the Lord's work. It is much easier for older widows and widowers to stay single than for younger ones. Are you a widow, widower or divorcee? What are you doing for God? He has given you this time to serve Him as a single person, not to sit around and moan about how lonely you are.

ADVICE FOR TWO CHRISTIANS WHO ARE MARRIED 7:10-11

To the married I give this command (not I but the Lord). Now Paul is going to give instructions to Christians who are married, where both the man and wife are born again Christians and have established a covenant home under Christ. What he says is essentially what the Lord Jesus taught in Matthew 5 and 19.

Once again, we must put this in context of the specific problem at Corinth. Celibacy was being taught as a superior state to marriage and the truly spiritual people were those who stayed single. The Corinthian Christians were reasoning, "Now that I am a Christian and married to a Christian, should I dissolve my marriage for the sake of the kingdom of God?" These Corinthians had a desire to please God and were willing to divorce their mates if this meant a deeper spirituality.

Today we would ask the question, "Is it ever right for a Christian to divorce and remarry?" It is the same basic problem, just a different situation.

What did the Lord Jesus Christ teach about divorce and remarriage? Jesus said the ideal marriage is one man for one woman for a lifetime. The Pharisees tried to trip Him up on the subject of marriage, for the prevalent thinking of that day was that a woman could be divorced for just about any cause. "Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason (Math 19:3)?" Christ goes back to the ideal marriage, Adam and Eve, to show that it was never God's original purpose that divorce should interrupt a marriage.

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female', and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matt. 19:4-6).

Christ then acknowledges that divorce, while not part of the original design of God, was allowed because of the sinfulness of the human heart.

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning" (Matt. 19:7-8).

While God hates divorce, He permits it because a perfect creation has been invaded by sin. Because of the stubborn, rebellious will of people, divorce was allowed by God, but it is not what He wants for man or woman, and divorce always falls into the permissive will of God. Hardness of heart is a refusal to listen to God and a determination to go our way no matter what He says. Christ goes on to say the only basis for divorce between a Christian man and woman is marital unfaithfulness (sexual immorality).

I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery" (Matt. 19:9).

The Greek word for "marital unfaithfulness" is *pornea* which is a word that could mean sexual unfaithfulness to one's mate, either of the opposite sex (heterosexual infidelity) or the same sex (homosexual infidelity). The innocent party has the right to file for divorce on the basis of unfaithfulness.

Even if adultery is a basis for divorce, it does not mean that divorce is an automatic necessity when adultery occurs. The faithful mate has the option to leave, but this is not mandatory. Every attempt should be made to put the marriage back together again. The offending party must repent, and the offended party must forgive. If this is done, a marriage

can go on to new heights of beauty, enjoyment and maturity. Christians should remember that while divorce may dissolve a marriage, it seldom, if ever, solves the problems. In fact, divorce usually creates more problems than it solves.

A wife must not separate from her husband. A Christian wife should not leave her husband for any other reason than adultery. Women in the church at Corinth were trying to leave their husbands so they would be more spiritual as a single person. God's perfect will is not to dissolve a marriage but that a marriage should be permanent. It is commanded that a woman should not divorce her husband.

Paul did not include the "exception" clause given by Christ. Why? Because he is dealing with a particular problem of the Corinthians—the leaving of the marriage state for celibacy. It is assumed that the "exception" clause was known and accepted by all in the Corinthian church, but it had no relevance to the problem of the celibate state as being morally superior to the marriage state.

But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. It is obvious that two Christians should not divorce. However, the "but" tells us that sometimes this command is violated by sinful people. If a Christian wife chooses to leave her husband, she is to remain unmarried, or she may be reconciled to her husband. While a Christian wife is not to divorce her husband, she may legally separate from him due to unbearable circumstances. A Christian woman does not have to live with a man who beats her (usually because of alcohol or drugs), who abuses her physically or sexually or who mentally and emotionally rapes her. She may legally separate but she cannot remarry unless her husband commits adultery. A legal separation is not a divorce but a protection for the offended party.

And a husband must not divorce his wife. A Christian man should not leave his Christian wife for any other reason than adultery. God intends marriage to be a permanent relationship. Christians are to be together for life. They vowed before God, to each other and before witnesses to stay together "for better or worse" and to "be faithful until death."

Forty years ago, I said "I do" to Carol but that commitment to Carol is not what has kept me true to her for all these years. I committed to God and promised God I would be faithful. I do not fear Carol but I do fear God and what He might do to me if I do not keep my vows to Him and my wife.

These verses tell us there is no divorce for Christians on the grounds of incompatibility, desertion, mental cruelty, physical abuse or whatever else the unsaved world may say are grounds. Christians are still sinful people and sometimes they get so far out of fellowship with Christ that it is impossible to live with them. One or both marriage partners can get into such a negative spiritual state that it is impossible for them to live together. They can legally separate but they cannot divorce except on the grounds of adultery. This is a very high standard and we Christians must maintain it at all costs.

What about the Christian wife or husband who wants a divorce so badly that he or she manipulates the marriage (usually through the sex life) so that one's mate is pressured into committing adultery? The person then rationalizes that he or she has a solid reason for divorce. God will certainly judge any Christian who manipulates marriage for his or her own selfish ends. We may fool others, or our mates, or even ourselves, but God knows the motives of the human heart and He will judge accordingly.

ADVICE TO THOSE IN A SPIRITUALLY MIXED MARRIAGE 7:12-24

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord). Now Paul is going to give marriage advice which the Lord Jesus Himself never taught on. It is the problem of one unsaved and one saved partner in a marriage. In the Corinthian church, there were husbands and wives who had been gloriously saved by the grace of a sovereign God, but their mates were still rejecters of Jesus Christ. According to Ezra 9 and 10, the Israelites were told to divorce their unbelieving mates whom they had married while in captivity in Babylon and any other Gentile partners they had acquired from the surrounding nations. Haggai 2 says that defilement was carried through touching a dead body, and the Jews and Gentile believers interpreted this to mean defilement is communicated or transmitted. Are Christians, therefore, defiled when married to unbelievers? The Corinthian Christians asked the honest question, "Should I divorce my unbelieving husband or wife to keep pure and stay in a celibate state to be more spiritual?"

This section is not viewing willful, rebellious marriages where a Christian says, "I'm going to marry that unbeliever because I love him or her, and I don't care what the Bible says!"

This is another problem in itself. I know countless Christians who defied the wisdom of parents, of preachers, of friends and God and married an unbeliever. These people are generally miserable and their marriages most often end in divorce. Paul is not addressing this problem but is addressing when both husband and wife are unsaved and then one partner gets saved and the other remains a rejecter of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. This verse clearly teaches the believer is not to leave the unbeliever as long as the unbeliever chooses to stay in the marriage relationship.

Christians often rationalize and say, "I was married to my mate before I became a Christian. Now that I am a Christian I do not believe my marriage was made in heaven; therefore, it is not valid. I think I ought to be able to get a divorce and establish a real Christian home." Not so, because God acknowledges marriage as valid for unbelievers as well as believers. It may be tough to live with an unbeliever, but God's grace is sufficient. How many Christian wives there were in Corinth who had to live with husbands who would get stinking drunk and commit sexual acts with prostitutes at the Temple of Aphrodite? How many Christian husbands in Corinth had to live with unsaved wives who thought, acted, and lived like thoroughgoing pagans, scoffing at them whenever they showed any interest in spiritual things? Some of these Christians were so discouraged they wanted to abandon their marriages, but Paul says, "Don't do it! Hang

in there and keep the marriage together!" Paul's point is that the Christian is never to initiate a divorce with an unbelieving partner.

For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. This is a parenthetical thought in the mind of Paul, and the essence is that unbelieving mates and children are set apart in a spiritual (religious) sense (not saving sense) because of the presence of the believing partner. There is special blessing and privilege which comes to unbelievers because of one's Christian mate. I will not comment on this anymore because in the next sermon I will come back to this verse and deal with it specifically as it relates to covenant families.

But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. If the unbeliever willfully deserts, walks out and refuses to stay, then the Christian is to let him or her go. The Christian is not under obligation to plead, beg, bargain or force the non-Christian to remain, if the unsaved partner becomes intolerant of the Christian and says, "I can't put up living with this Christian one minute longer," then the Christian is to let him or her go. Notice carefully, it is the non-Christian who initiates this action. The unsaved partner files for divorce, not the saved partner.

A Cape Town brain surgeon put it very well. When asked what he found so difficult about his wife's new-found faith in Christ, he stressed two things: first, she was no longer the person with whom he had originally fallen in love and whom he had decided to marry; secondly, there was another Man about the house, to whom she was all the time referring her every decision and whom she chose to consult for his advice and instructions. He was no longer the boss in his own house: Jesus gave the orders and set the pace.

A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances. The phrase "not bound" comes from the Greek root word *doulos* from which we get the word "slave." Slaves were bound to their masters until they were set free, and then they were bound no longer. Paul is not talking about mere separation but divorce and the right to remarry, because in I Corinthians 7:39 he says, "A woman is bound (*doulos*) to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord." The word "bound" comes from the same root word as "not bound." So when Paul is talking about "not bound" he is referring to a legitimate divorce and the right to remarry on the basis of desertion.

God has called us to live in peace. While the believing partner has a legitimate basis for divorce if the unbeliever departs, everything possible should be done by the Christian to keep the marriage together. God has called the Christian to peace. Separation or divorce would disrupt the peace of the marriage union. The Christian should stay in the marriage and seek peace. A believer is not to stir up and tear up a marriage because there is a difference of religious belief. Furthermore, a Christian does not want to have guilt feelings upon the conscience for driving an unbelieving mate away. If the non-Christian should leave and divorce, the Christian should know in the heart that he or she did all that was possible to keep the marriage together.

How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? There is always the possibility the unsaved partner will be saved, and this is why the believing partner should "hang in there" as long as possible. The believing partner does not actually save the unbelieving partner but becomes the instrument God uses to save the unbelieving partner. The most likely instrument God will use in the salvation of the unbelieving partner is the believing partner. Sometimes the witness will only be by life and not words, but a saved mate should so live before an unsaved partner that the unsaved one can see Christ has made him or her a better mate.

I knew a woman who was saved long before her husband. She was very aggressive in her desire to see her husband saved. She would constantly harp at him to come to Christ. She would leave notes on his pillow and write in lipstick on the mirror, "Jesus saves." She drove a wedge between her and her husband so he became even more rebellious. Finally some people took her aside and explained to her she was to win her husband without saying a word according to I Peter 3:1. She tried it and it worked. He became a true Christian. The last time I saw this couple the man was an elder in his church.

How many times I have heard unsaved husbands say, "I'm not saved but Christianity has made my wife a better person, a better mate, a better lover and a better mother." Unsaved partners may argue with the truth of the gospel but they cannot argue with a changed life. Many Christians give up too easily on their unsaved mates.

Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. What Paul taught the Corinthians about divorce, he taught to all the churches. God called each Christian to salvation, and has called the believer to stay in the place God called. Paul is not saying if a person has been a prostitute, gambler or bank robber, he or she should stay in that state or environment after conversion to Christ. He is talking about social relationships and marriage in particular. For those who were called into a spiritually mixed marriage, they ought to stay in that relationship.

Before closing the chapter, a warning must be sounded. Being human and sinful and weak, we are all equipped with a remarkable ability to rationalize. Unless we consciously guard against it, when we experience marital difficulties, we'll begin to search for a way out instead of a way through. Given sufficient time in the crucible, divorce will seem our only option, our long-awaited and much-deserved utopia. And we will begin to push in that direction, at times ignoring the inner voice of God's Spirit and at other times violating the written principles of God's Word. Either is a grievous act (Charles Swindoll, Divorce).

Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. Brother, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to. God's basic principle is that a person should stay in that social condition or relationship in which he was called without complaint. If there is a possibility to move out, such as in the case of slavery (and there is a biblical basis to do so), this has the approval of God. However, Paul has taken these illustrations and applied them to Christian marriage. The basic principle is that Christians married to unsaved mates are to stay in that marriage without divorce and without complaint, for this is God's ideal. As the country boy said, "Stick with the one who brung ya to the dance!" However, there may be biblical grounds for divorce and only the Biblical criterion is to be used.

There is a word of comfort here for those Christians who are living with non-Christian mates. They are to remain with God. The God of all comfort will keep His hand of their lives. He will come to their aid and rescue them when necessary. He will meet their needs abundantly and graciously. Their key is to remain with God through faith.

CONCLUSION

Those of us who are saved need to understand that God hates divorce. Yet He has permitted divorce and remarriage on three accounts only. First, a divorce before conversion to Christ. Second Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" This verse says all sins committed before conversion to Christ are forgiven, and a person gets a new, fresh start in life. This verse does not say every sin but divorce is forgiven. Divorce is a serious sin, but it is just another sin and it can be forgiven. It is not uncommon for an unbeliever to be married and divorced two or three times. Yet, his or her sin can be forgiven and the slate wiped clean, and there can be remarriage in Christ. Second, a Christian who has a mate guilty of sexual immorality, and he or she refuses to repent of this

shameful act, is free to divorce the guilty party and be remarried. Third, divorce and remarriage is allowed when a mate is an unbeliever and he or she willfully and permanently deserts the believing partner. These are the only grounds for divorce for a Christian.

Perhaps you are a non-Christian husband or wife. Do you have a Christian mate who has loved you, cared for you, prayed for you and yet you are in rebellion to Jesus Christ? Have you hardened your heart to Christ? Have you let your pride keep you from bowing your will to Christ as Lord? Is your stubborn heart keeping you from receiving Jesus as Savior? Christ will heal your broken heart and your broken marriage. He will make your marriage more wonderful than you could ever imagine. Jesus saves marriages by first saving people. He changes lives and then changes marriages. Come to Him, rebellious husband. Come to Him, rebellious wife. When Christ changes your heart, He will then change your marriage.