

XI. Singleness, Marriage, and Divorce

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1 Corinthians 7:1-16

Aim: To reaffirm the God-ordained sanctity of marriage.

Chapter 7 forms the last main unit of the section that began at 5:1, in which Paul corrects the wrong thinking of the Corinthians in the area of morality, especially sexual morality. It is devoted to marriage and singleness, and it completes Paul's 'Holiness Code' begun in chapter 5. More immediately it follows directly from the preceding passage about 'fornication.' In this chapter Paul begins to answer questions from a letter sent by the Corinthians (cp. vv. 1, 25). Yet he has so arranged his letter that his replies fall within the block of teaching on sexual holiness which he began at 5:1. This chapter, in which Paul gives positive teaching on sexuality, forms a fitting conclusion to the longer preceding passage in which Paul admonished the adulterer (5:1-8) and those fornicating with prostitutes (6:12-20).

With this chapter we come to a major transition in Paul's letter. Up to this point he has been dealing with two major manifestations of the Corinthians' contamination with worldly thinking and doing: lack of unity (chapters 1-4) and lack of sexual purity (chapters 5-6). But now Paul turns from the contamination of the church by the world to the confusion of the church about their faith. This confusion was apparent in that they had written to Paul and asked for his guidance on several important aspects of the Christian life. The letter was probably delivered to him by Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17). They had questions about marriage (chapter 7), food offered to idols (chapters 8-10), worship and the Lord's Supper (chapter 11), spiritual gifts (chapters 12-14), the resurrection of the dead (chapter 16), and the giving of money (chapter 16).

Satan has effectively deployed the devastating one-two punch of contamination and confusion down through the centuries. He is quite happy if he can land either, but he had scored with both in Corinth and the church was reeling! They were both contaminated and confused! They had swallowed their society's message and had failed to understand their own! It is important to realize Satan, like any good fighter, uses these two punches together. One always sets up the other. He uses contamination to confuse us and he uses confusion to contaminate us. Even though Satan uses both punches effectively, confusion is the deadlier of the two. In other words, the more confused we are about the Christian faith, the more apt we are to be contaminated with the world (cp. Hos. 4:6).

One of the skills in reading this letter is to recognize that Paul is responding to a real-life situation at that time, one moreover that is not clear to us at every point. We need to enter into his dialogue with the Corinthians as best we can and seek to discern the principles underlying Paul's words which we will then apply to our circumstances.

A. To Marry or Not to Marry? (1 Cor. 7:1-9)

One of the subjects about which the Corinthians were muddled and confused was marriage. It appears there were two extreme viewpoints on Christianity in general and marriage in particular. Some in the church were 'libertines' while others were 'legalists.' The libertines subscribed to the notion that the body and all its activities are morally neutral. These people had a tendency to play fast and loose with marriage. They downplayed the sacredness of it and took a casual view

1 Corinthians – Lesson 11

of the sexual immorality swirling around them in Corinth. The legalists, on the other hand, were acutely aware of the sexual license of the city, and they responded to it by suggesting the Christian should avoid sex altogether. This view, of course, inevitably led them to draw two conclusions: single life is superior to the married life, and Christians who are married should abstain from sexual relations. With both the libertines and the legalists, marriage was the loser. So Paul seeks to steer a middle course between these extremes. So what does Paul teach in this passage? Two things: the single life is good, but the married life is natural!

1. If You Are Married (7:1-7)

a) *The Question on Marriage (7:1)*

¹*Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”*

[Translation note: regarding the statement ‘it is good for a man...,’ the ESV and NIV punctuate it with in quotation marks and the NKJV and NASB do not. Thus, the first two translations treat this statement as Paul quoting from their letter to him, i.e., reiterating the Corinthian position, while the lack of quotation marks in the latter two translations indicates this as a statement of Paul’s own position in response to whatever was written to him by the Corinthians.]

‘Now concerning the matters about which you wrote’ signals that Paul now begins to answer the questions sent to him by members of the Corinthian church. His reply indicates two things about the questions. First, the interrogators were not simply seeking information but attempting to establish their point of view. As well, they were probably not at all representing the interests of the whole church, but their own sectional interests. In chapters 5 and 6 Paul has been responding to those Corinthians who saw no problems with *porneia*, ‘sexual immorality.’ By contrast, Paul’s responses in this passage suggest that the questioners held ascetical opinions about sexual intercourse. Apparently, some believers had gotten the notion that being single and celibate was more spiritual than being married, and they disparaged marriage entirely. Perhaps someone was teaching that sex was ‘unspiritual’ and should be altogether forsaken.

‘It is good for a man not to touch a woman.’ This is the phrase that stirs the wrath of multitudes who see it as proof that Paul regarded women as substandard beings. But this phrase was simply the standard way for Jews to refer to sexual intercourse. All Paul is saying is that if a man chooses to remain unmarried, it is good and right for him to do so. The statement has absolutely nothing to do with the worth of women *per se*. It’s merely Paul’s way of saying there should be no stigma attached to any man who doesn’t marry.

Literally, Paul says ‘it is good for a man not to touch a woman.’ This phrase was a common Jewish euphemism for sexual intercourse. Since Corinth was a by-word for sexual immorality in the Greco-Roman world, it would be natural for keen Christians to swing toward the opposite end of the spectrum and to elevate complete abstinence from sexual relations as a mark of true spirituality and godliness. The dualism of body and spirit was foundational to Greek thinking. If the body is inferior to the pure spirit, simply a prison house of the real person, as was widely believed, then to ignore and so nullify its sexual demands would clearly be a sign of superior spirituality. Abstinence from marriage would then clearly be ‘good’ (meaning ‘better’).

Paul does not say that singleness is the only good condition or that marriage is in any way wrong or inferior to singleness. He says only that singleness, as long as it is celibate, can be good.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 11

b) The Cure for Temptation (7:2)

²*But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.*

But Paul will have none of it. He begins his rebuttal of this view with the potent consideration ‘because of the temptation to sexual immorality (*porneia*).’ He knows that you do not correct the excessive swing of the pendulum in one direction by an equal, but opposite, swing in the other. Marriage is not the second-best spiritual option. The exclusivity of one man to one woman within Christian marriage is built into this statement, echoing the Genesis 2:24 principle. The apostle proffers monogamy as the only allowable standard for marriage. Let each man and each woman marry, ‘have’ implying sexual activity. Remarkably for that male-dominated society, Paul addresses equally the needs of the man and the woman.

But if the single life is good, the married life is natural. The legalists who reacted to the flood of immorality around them by refraining from marriage or sex within marriage were wrong. They were countering one evil by endorsing another. Marriage was not part of the immorality problem; it was the solution!

Scripture gives numerous reasons for marriage. First, marriage is for *procreation* (Gen. 1:28). Marriage is also for *pleasure* (Pr. 5:18-19; Song of Solomon). Marriage is a *partnership* (Gen. 2:18). Marriage is a *picture* of the church (Eph. 5:23-32). And marriage is for *purity*. It protects from sexual immorality by meeting the need for physical fulfillment.

At this point, Paul is dealing with Christians who are already married, either to another believer or perhaps to an unbeliever, if the Christian has been converted since the marriage. Both these groups will be in view again later, in verses 10-11 and 12-16. His point is that withdrawing from marriage or abstaining from sexual relations within marriage is not ‘good,’ since faithful monogamous marriage is God’s good gift for humankind.

c) The Responsibilities of Spouses (7:3-4)

³*The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.*

⁴*For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.*

Paul proceeds to give three guidelines for Christians who decide to marry. First, they are to practice monogamy. Each man is to have a wife and each woman is to have a husband. (By the way, these words also clearly rule out all homosexual marriages.) Secondly, husbands and wives are to satisfy each other’s sexual needs. Marriage cannot be a hedge against immorality if either partner deprives the other in this area. Marriage only works if each partner concerns him or herself with the other. Marriage partners exist for each other. That is why Paul says neither has authority over his or her own body.

God holds all marriage to be sacred and He holds sexual relations between husband and wife not only to be sacred but proper and even obligatory. Paul makes it clear that physical relations within marriage are not simply a privilege and a pleasure but a responsibility. Husbands and wives have a ‘duty’ to give sexual satisfaction to each other. There is no distinction between men and women. The husband has no more rights in this regard than the wife.

In speaking of mutual ‘conjugal rights,’ husband and wife to each other, Paul uses a word that literally means ‘debt,’ implying obligation to meet one another’s sexual needs. Paul uses the

1 Corinthians – Lesson 11

same word as in Jesus' direction to 'render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's' (Mark 12:17). Paul is not speaking here of conjugal 'rights,' from the viewpoint of demands of the recipient. Rather, he places the emphasis on the *giver's* responsibility to meet the sexual needs of the marriage partner. This is expanded further in verse 4 where the point is that at the heart of the marriage relationship there is a giving of oneself away. Sexual activity for the Christian is not to be centered in oneself but in the other. The present tense of *exousiazēi* ('have authority over' indicates a general statement that is always true. Spouses' mutual authority over each other's bodies is continuous; it lasts throughout marriage. In fact, sexual relations between a husband and his wife are God-ordained and commanded.

d) *The Exception to the Rule (7:5)*

⁵*Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.*

Thirdly, husbands and wives may abstain from sexual relations for a short, special period of fasting and praying. This is not a situation in which one partner devotes him or herself to fasting and prayer, but where the two do so together. Also the fasting and prayer mentioned here are of a special kind. Paul assumes husbands and wives will pray together regularly.

Verse 5 shows that there is one set of circumstances that can be regarded as an exception to this 'rule.' But even here, the exception is carefully qualified by two restrictive requirements. It must be 'by mutual consent' and 'for a time.' Neither party is to feel aggrieved or deprived because the other has imposed his or her will unilaterally, nor is this to be without a definite terminus in view. In fact, his verb 'deprive' (*apostereite*) could be understood as 'defraud' or 'cheat,' suggesting that there is something dishonest about the severance of sexual relations within marriage. This highlights once more the emphasis on the responsibility to meet the needs of the other person rather than demanding one's own rights. Paul knows that unless the limitations of the first half of verse 5 are clearly operating, the temptations of the second half of verse 5 are likely to overwhelm them, 'because of your lack of self-control.'

e) *The Concession of Paul (7:6)*

⁶*Now as a concession, not a command, I say this.*

[Note: this statement is variously interpreted as applying: 1) to what came before (i.e., in verse 5 or verses 1-5), or; 2) to what comes next (i.e., verse 6). The ESV punctuates verses 6-7 as a separate paragraph, thus separating verse 6 from 5 and attaching it to verse 7. The NIV, NKJV, and NASB all include verses 1-7 in one paragraph.]

This is Paul's final caveat in this paragraph. He is not making a strait-jacket for every married couple, by instituting an apostolic instruction that they *must* periodically refrain from sexual relations, in order to pray. Rather they *may*, if they so choose.

Let the Corinthians understand that Paul's words about marrying are a matter of his 'advice' not a 'command.' The 'concession' mentioned here probably relates to 7:1-5 rather than only to 7:5. Paul prescribes marriage as one way ahead for the Corinthians, yet he will not command it as a duty.

'Concession' may not be the best translation. The Greek (*sungnōmē*) means 'to think the same thing as someone, to have a joint opinion, a common mind or understanding.' It can also mean 'awareness.' 'But this I say' refers back to what has just been said about marriage. Paul was

1 Corinthians – Lesson 11

saying he was *aware* of the goodness of being single and celibate, yet aware also of the privileges and responsibilities of marriage. His comments were not meant as a command for every believer to be married.

f) *The Gift from God (7:7)*

⁷*I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.*

Although this verse sums up his general outlook and attitude, it is not easy to be completely sure of what Paul means. Does he mean that he wishes everyone was single, as he was presumably, whether as never married, or perhaps as a widower? Paul, apparently, was not only single but was happy to keep it that way. Can this be construed as a call for celibacy, as a more excellent way than marriage? Certainly this verse has been pressed into service for that cause. Or does he mean, as some commentators suggest, that he wishes everyone were free from the unhelpful dualism and its resulting asceticism, which he is correct in this passage?

One's need to be married or one's capacity not to be is called a *charisma*, a Holy Spirit infused 'donation' from God. In Paul's mind that is not merely a matter of natural temperament, passively to be borne. Rather it is to be seized gratefully, as God's gift to oneself. In that a *charisma* is a gift bestowed graciously and not because the recipient deserves it, marriage and the single state are alike unmerited blessings.

Although celibacy is good for Christians who are not married, it is a gift from God that He does not give to every believer. Just as it is wrong to misuse a gift that we have, it is also wrong to try to use a gift we do not have. For a person who does not have the gift of celibacy, trying to practice it brings moral and spiritual frustration. But for those who have it as God's gift, singleness, like all His gifts, is a great blessing.

The fact of the matter is that all are not as he is (single), 'but each has his own gift from God.' In recognizing marriage as God's good gift, Paul denies implicitly that he would want to take it away from those to whom God has given it. Therefore, as he will develop in the following verses, those who are already married are not to seek to extricate themselves from this God-given state, but neither should those who are unmarried regard it as mandatory that they should end their single state. The important perspective is to recognize God's providence in our current situation, to receive it and use it faithfully as His 'gift,' according to the Maker's instruction, recognizing that it may change with time, and that all this is under God's sovereign wisdom. It is much better for us to live in the enjoyment of God's current providential provisions and sovereign overruling of our circumstances and to prove His faithfulness *within* the circumstances rather than concentrating all our energies on changing them.

2. If You Are Not Married (7:8-9)

Paul addresses three different groups within the Corinthian congregation, defined not by their preferences (as in chapter 1), but by their situation in life. He begins with the single (vv. 8-9), moves on to those married to fellow-Christians (vv. 10-11), and concludes with those married to unbelievers (vv. 12-16).

Paul has drawn attention to himself as an unmarried man, a state bestowed upon him by God. Here, he focuses upon those who are unmarried: singles, widows, and no doubt, divorcees.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 11

a) *To Remain Single (7:8)*

⁸*To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am.*

Here Paul's conscience allows him to offer himself as an example of a single man. For emphasis, this verse possibly alludes to what the church had mentioned in its earlier letter – 'it is good...' (see vs. 1).

Jackman: The term translated 'unmarried' is a little more specific than it appears. *Agamoi* is masculine and balances 'widows,' which is clearly feminine. So, rather than speaking about those who have never been married and those who have been widowed (men or women), Paul is probably addressing only the widowed of both sexes. This is supported by the observation that *agamos* is used again in verses 11 and 34, where it seems in both contexts to refer to those who have been married previously but are no longer.

MacArthur: The 'unmarried' and 'widows' are the two categories of single people mentioned here, but there is a third category of single people ('virgins') indicated in verse 25. 'Virgins' (*parthenoi*) clearly refers to single people who have never been married. 'Widows' (*chēraï*) are single people who formerly were married but were severed from that relationship by the death of the spouse. That leaves the matter of the 'unmarried.' Who are they? In verse 34, Paul talks about two different groups, the 'unmarried' and the 'virgins;' this indicates the unmarried are not virgins. Here in verse 8 the 'unmarried' are different than 'widows.' Verse 11 indicates that a divorced Christian should remain 'unmarried.' Thus, the term 'unmarried' (*agamos*, from 'wedding, or marriage' with the negative prefix *a*) indicates those who were previously married, but are not widows; people who are now single, but are not virgins. The 'unmarried' woman, therefore, is a divorced woman.

Paul is speaking to people who were divorced or widowed before coming to Christ. They wanted to know if they had the right to marry. Paul identifies himself with those who are free of marriage. By that statement Paul affirms that he was formerly married. Because marriage seems to have been required for membership in the Sanhedrin, to which Paul may once have belonged, because he had been so devoutly committed to Pharisaic tradition (Gal. 1:14), and because he refers to one who could have been his wife's mother (Rom. 16:13), we may assume that he was once married. His statement here to the previously married confirms that—'even as I.' Likely he was a widower.

They were not to be made to feel that their state is somehow inferior, or less fulfilled, than those who were married, since it is far better to be unmarried than to be unhappily married or unequally matched.

'Remain' is a keyword in this chapter. Evidently, some of the Corinthians were agitated at a time of 'crisis' (cp. v. 26) and were seeking to make significant lifestyle changes. Paul cautions against 'change for change's sake' by his use of the verb 'remain' throughout the chapter (vv. 11, 20, 24, 40) and quite specifically in one passage (vv. 17-24). Paul is single and intends to 'remain' single. Singleness was not a negative for Paul, a means of escaping from sin, but a positive attitude, based on a desire to please the Lord by obedient service.

b) *To Marry (7:9)*

⁹*But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*

1 Corinthians – Lesson 11

However, Paul again enters a caveat. It is the inner attitude that concerns him. Every normal human being struggles with sexual temptation and those who are single, or who are no longer married, face particular types of temptation. If they have been taught only that ‘it is good for them to remain single,’ then the solution of marriage is barred to them and so they have no legitimate outlet for their sexual drive. The result is likely to be that they will be ‘aflame.’ Paul does not say ‘with passion;’ that is an addition of the translators.

‘If they cannot control themselves’ – if that is not their ‘gift’ – then ‘let them marry.’ In mind here is the ‘heat’ of sexual passion which is absorbed, softened, and cooled within the intimacy of the marriage commitment. Otherwise it would ‘burn’ out of control, bringing destruction to all parties.

Repression is not the right solution. Marriage, which is the good gift of God in creation, is. Paul therefore wants to rehabilitate marriage in Corinthian thinking, not as a remedy for lust, but as the divinely provided channel for wholly positive human sexuality.

Paul, then, is making a plea here for balance. There should be no stigma attached to either the single or the married life.

B. To Separate or Not to Separate? (1 Cor. 7:10-16)

The legalists in Corinth had drawn several conclusions regarding marriage. One was that the single life was morally superior to married life. If sex is always wrong, the single life could no longer be considered merely as an alternative; it was an imperative. Paul himself was single and appeared to be the perfect model each Christian should seek to emulate in determining his or her marital status. A second conclusion of the ‘anti-sex’ people had to draw was that those who had already ‘messed things up’ by getting married should either abstain from sexual relations or get a divorce.

Paul was compelled to respond to both of these conclusions. He tackled the first by saying that the single life, although it does afford certain advantages in serving the Lord, is not the type of life one could live without a special gift or calling from the Lord (cp. Mt. 19:11-12). The second idea had two parts: the married should either abstain from sex or get a divorce. Paul tackled the abstinence part by insisting one of the main purposes of marriage is to serve as an outlet for sexual passion and thus provide shelter from the temptation to fall into sexual immorality. Abstinence from sexual relations, therefore, is to be only for a short period of time, by mutual consent, and for a spiritual purpose.

In verse 10-16 Paul focuses on the divorce issue. His discussion of this touchy matter falls into two sections. First he discusses marriages in which both partners are Christians (vv. 10-11). Then he turns his attention to mixed marriages—those in which a Christian is married to an unbeliever (vv. 12-16).

1. To a Christians Married to Another Christian (7:10-11)

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

The word ‘married’ translates *gegamēkosin*, a participial form that normally indicates that a completed action has an enduring consequence. Paul informs the church that because the

1 Corinthians – Lesson 11

commitments undertaken by those who are married are for life, no wife should contemplate divorce. Paul gives a ‘charge’ to instruct them (*paraggellō*). Apparently, some were contemplating divorce. That both partners of the marriage in view here were Christians is clear from Paul’s giving them ‘instructions’ (which he never gave to unbelievers) and from the fact that in verses 12-16 he deals specifically with marriages in which only one partner is a believer.

Some couples in Corinth had begun to wonder if their marriage should be ended in order for them to be more spiritual. Whatever their reasons, however, they were not to divorce. Paul responds to this situation by repeating the teaching of Jesus on divorce. That is what his phrase, ‘yet not I but the Lord,’ means. What he says here is a *command*, (not an option as in verse 6). He is now quoting the command of the Lord. The Corinthians would have received this tradition from Paul when he established the church, and thus he appeals to the teaching of Jesus.

What was the teaching of Jesus? Essentially this: marriage was instituted by God Himself, and it should be considered so sacred and permanent that those who enter it will not seek a divorce except where one partner has become involved in adultery (*porneia*). Even in that case, divorce is allowed but not commanded (Mt. 5:31-32; 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18). Paul appears to make a further exception where the unbelieving spouse withdraws from the marriage (v. 15), the so-called ‘Pauline Privilege.’

The apostle relays to the church what Jesus had taught about marriage and divorce. The requirement is that a married woman ‘is not to be separated,’ by which is meant terminating her union with a view to beginning a new relationship. She considers this radical step even though her husband, it seems, has not committed adultery. Had this occurred, Paul might have mentioned it, thus legitimating the woman’s irreversible separation and allowing a second marriage. What he says, then, is that a wife is not to leave her spouse if he is innocent of immorality. Apparently, among the Jews it was not permitted for a woman to seek divorce (cp. Dt. 24:1). But it was otherwise among non-Jews, and Paul addresses himself to a church composed largely of Gentiles.

So to Christian couples, Paul says, ‘Stay married.’ Marriage is a lifelong commitment that neither partner is to break. They were not to allow themselves to be hoodwinked into thinking marriage consigned them to a life of second-class spirituality. They could be married and still be pleasing to the Lord. After all, marriage was instituted by God Himself.

The word ‘separate’ or ‘leave’ (*chōrizō*) in verse 10 is equivalent to ‘divorce’ or ‘send away’ (*aphiēmi*) in verse 11. Both verses signify the end of the marriage relationship and that is off limits for a Christian. To be clear, Paul was not discussing divorce based on adultery, for which Jesus specifically affirmed provision (Mt. 5:32; 19:8-9). He was talking about divorce for other reasons, even supposedly spiritual ones.

But what about those who had already been deceived into getting a divorce? It was too late for them to prevent it. So what were they to do? Paul answers by saying they must stay single or be reconciled to their former partners. It may be that in a sense, because adultery has not occurred, the woman remains married in the sight of God although not in the perception of society.

Almost immediately, as we are often seeing in this chapter, Paul looks at an exception, ‘but if she does.’ Although the Bible is uniformly clear that God hates divorce and it is never His way (Mal. 2:16), yet in the reality of a fallen world and human sinfulness, that same God regularizes

1 Corinthians – Lesson 11

the process by which divorce may happen. It is because of the hope of reconciliation and of the rebuilding of the marriage, that re-marriage is forbidden.

Recognizing that divorce was permitted in the law of Moses ‘because of the hardness of heart,’ Jesus decreed that the only circumstances in which it is acceptable are those of ‘sexual immorality’ because this sin destroys the ‘one flesh’ unity on which marriage is based (cp. Mt. 19:3-9). Even in such a case, divorce is permitted, rather than required, in order to regularize the situation publicly, which is that the marriage has been destroyed.

2. To a Christian Married to a Non-Christian (7:12-16)

What counsel does Paul offer those Christians who are married to an unbeliever? To be clear, Paul is not talking about whether a believer should marry an unbeliever. A little later, he explicitly says the Christian is free to marry ‘only in the Lord’ (7:39). The situation Paul is addressing is where two unbelievers had married and one subsequently became a Christian. This was happening with great frequency in Corinth and other cities where the gospel was being preached. We can well understand how the unbeliever in this situation might contemplate divorce. But the thing troubling Paul was that many of the Christian spouses were the ones contemplating divorce. If sexual relations make the two partners one flesh (cp. 6:16), the Christian married to an unbeliever would be one flesh with an unbeliever. Could such a union ever be considered right? Wouldn’t divorce be the best solution in such a case?

In light of Paul’s teachings that their bodies were members of Christ and were temples of the Holy Spirit (6:15-20), the Corinthian Christians were justifiably concerned about whether or not to maintain marital union with an unbeliever. Some may have thought that such a union joined Christ to Satan, defiling the believer and the children and dishonoring the Lord.

In the climate of the Corinthian church, where marriage was being spiritually downgraded, the new converts were probably being encouraged to come out of their pagan marriages in order to be more spiritual Christians. They would otherwise be contaminated by a sexual relationship with an unbeliever, hindered in their spiritual development. But again, Paul will have none of that.

Paul divides his guidance on this matter into two parts. First, he offers guidance to the Christian who is married to a willing unbeliever, that is, an unbeliever who wants to see the marriage continue. The Christian in this situation is to be content to maintain the marriage. He or she is not to separate from or divorce the unbelieving partner.

a) If the Unbeliever Stays (7:12-14)

(1) The Command (7:12-13)

¹²*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. ¹³If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.*

‘To the rest’ indicates those who have not been covered by the previous two paragraphs, that is believers married to unbelievers. They are probably called ‘the rest’ because they are the only group in the church whose situation has not yet been reviewed. In a Gentile community like Corinth, much as in our own culture, this situation would often arise. Paul is not teaching here that a Christian believer may enter into the ‘unequal yoke’ of marriage with an unbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14-15). What happens, however, when one of the marriage partners is subsequently

1 Corinthians – Lesson 11

converted? There would have been a number of them at Corinth, and perhaps some were considering divorce as the next step. That is Paul's focus here.

The phrase 'I, not the Lord, say,' is not a disclaimer of inspiration on Paul's part. Back in verse 10 he used the phrase, not I, but the Lord.' There, he was referring to a matter on which the Lord Jesus Christ gave explicit teaching during His earthly ministry. In verse 12, Paul is dealing with a matter the Lord had not specifically dealt with, a view supported by the silence of the Gospels on the matter. The contrast then, is not between inspired and uninspired teaching, but between what Jesus spoke about and what He didn't speak about. Paul is no longer quoting the Lord but is now giving his own teaching. It is evident that in Paul's mind his teaching was to be kept separate from the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus had not taught directly about this problem. Paul's statement is not a denial of inspiration or an indication that Paul is only giving his own human opinion. It is only to say that God had not given any previous revelation on the subject, but Paul was not setting it forth.

Paul is not saying these few verses are less divinely inspired than all of the rest of his writings, or that they lack divine authority. He is simply affirming that unlike the previous case (vv. 10-11) we have no direct teaching from the Lord Jesus about this. That, in itself, is hardly surprising, since the ministry of the Lord Jesus on earth was almost exclusively to Israel and Jewish communities. The Old Testament law forbade cross-religious marriages, but this new set of circumstances, with the spread of the gospel in the Gentile world, now required new definitive instruction, which the apostle gives.

The apostle's clear teaching is that the Christian must not divorce the unbelieving (*apistos*, 'without faith') partner, if it is the case that he or she 'consents to live with' them. We note a symmetry here, a moral even-handedness. Exactly the same advice is given to the 'wife' as to the 'brother,' indicating that both the men and the women were subject to the same limitations.

(2) The Principle (7:14)

¹⁴*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.*

Paul now gives his reason for this teaching, as signaled by the small word 'for.' Believers, especially wives, may have felt that being yoked to an unbeliever meant that they were somehow 'unholy' or 'unclean' in that union. But in fact, says Paul, the opposite is true. It is not that the believer is made 'unholy' in the unbeliever, but that the unbeliever is made 'holy' in the believer!

But what about the defilement issue? Is the believer defiled by being married to an unbeliever and in being one flesh with him or her? Far from it! Instead of the believer being defiled by the unbeliever, Paul says the unbeliever is 'sanctified' by the believer, and the children of such a marriage are 'holy.' The marriage is honorable, and the children, if any, are legitimate.

What does Paul mean? Clearly he is not referring to salvation. For an answer we need to go back to the Old Testament idea of ritual purity and contamination. The idea of being 'made holy' (*hēgiastai*, perfect passive from *hagiazō*, 'to separate'), or sanctified, is that of being set apart, to a special purpose or ownership. 'Saints' are 'set apart' people, within the sphere of God's grace. This refers to their standing rather than character and certainly does not indicate

1 Corinthians – Lesson 11

perfection. But a man could become ritually unclean in a variety of ways and this would exclude him from entering the presence of God in the Temple. Thus, the ‘unbelieving’ partner remains set apart for the believing spouse.

However, the emphasis of the gospel is not that of contaminating uncleanness, but of contagious holiness. The unbelieving partner and the children produced by the marriage come within the sphere of God’s grace. Far from seeking to get out of the marriage, the Christian partner has a new calling to pray, love, and serve the unbeliever, in the expectation and hope that God will graciously move in upon the whole family and eventually unite them together in faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul does not mean that the unbeliever somehow ‘becomes holy,’ as if by some kind of spiritual progress based on the principle of osmosis. Rather, Paul probably means that God treats the marriage union as ‘holy’ on account of the *partner* who is one of God’s ‘holy’ ones. This does not mean that the unbeliever is saved automatically by being married to a Christian as, indeed, verse 16 makes clear. Yet the unbeliever’s marriage with a believer places him or her in a place of greater opportunity to find salvation than would otherwise be the case.

This certainly should not be construed to mean that the presence of a Christian in the home automatically saves his or her spouse and children. Paul does not suggest that they possess (unwittingly), or will possess, any spiritual benefits conferred via believing partners. The sanctification is matrimonial and familial, not personal or spiritual. However, the acceptance of Christ by either a husband or wife brings into the family circle a holy atmosphere and the possibilities of a Christian home. 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. One Christian in a home graces the entire home.

Paul’s confidence that the children were ‘not unclean but now were holy (*hagiai*)’ suggests that they somehow entered into the same blessings as their now-believing parents. On that account, many argue that children were baptized along with their parents at the time of their conversion and baptism. It appears that God’s covenant of ‘holiness’ extends to the children of believers as it did under the Old Testament in the sign of circumcision for baby sons of the covenant (Gen. 17:9-14). The sign of baptism, however, does not automatically convey the blessings of the covenant. These must be appropriated by each person in term.

b) If the Unbeliever Leaves (7:15-16)

¹⁵*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.* ¹⁶*For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

This leads us to the other possibility in a ‘mixed’ marriage—the one in which the Christian is married to an unwilling unbeliever. What is to be done here? Paul stresses that the initiative rests with the unbelieving partner. If he or she desires a divorce, the believer really has no choice in the matter. If the unbeliever begins the divorce proceedings, the Christian partner is not to contest. Again the word ‘leave’ or ‘separate’ (*chōrizō*) refers to divorce.

Sometimes faithful love and commitment meets only with resistance and rebellion. What if the unbeliever decides to end the marriage and walks out on the believing partner? In such a situation Paul indicates that nothing is gained by trying at all costs to prevent the unbeliever from leaving. This then becomes the only other ground envisaged in Scripture on which divorce can

1 Corinthians – Lesson 11

be an acceptable option for the believer. When conflict predominates in the marriage and the home, because the believer is trying at all costs to keep the unbeliever in a marriage, for which there is no longer any enthusiasm or desire on the unbeliever's part, it is better to allow them to leave.

God wants the believer to live in peace. If the unbeliever is set on divorce, it is better for the believer to let him or her go than to engage in bickering and fighting that defames the name of Christ. The abandoned Christian need not struggle to retrieve the irretrievable. The union has been ended by someone who does not know the Lord. Some, of course, would like to use Paul's words as a blanket justification for any and every divorce. However, Paul makes this statement only in the context of the unbeliever initiating divorce.

Suppose the unbeliever does initiate a divorce? Does the believer have the right to remarry? Most biblical scholars agree the phrase 'A brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases' means the believer is free to remarry. The word 'bound' (*dedoulōtai*) is a perfect passive verb which means being forced into permanent slavery. Since permanent desertion *is* tantamount to divorce, the Christian is unburdened and free to remarry. The strictures upon a believer leaving a marriage were stated by Paul in verse 10 in his admonition 'in that case' to remain unmarried or else to be reconciled to the spouse. In this case, where an unbeliever leaves a believer, it appears that the one left behind is free to remarry in these circumstances.

In God's sight, the bond between a husband and wife is dissolved only by death (Rom 7:2), adultery (Mt. 19:9), or an unbeliever's leaving. When the bond, or 'bondage,' is broken in any of these ways, a Christian is free to remarry. Throughout Scripture, whenever legitimate divorce occurs, remarriage is assumed.

Even though Scripture never encourages divorce, it does permit it in the case of adultery, or in the case of the unbeliever who doesn't want to continue being married to a believer. Those who happen to be divorced for other reasons need to reflect long and hard on the fact that there is forgiveness with God.

Is the tone of verse 16 optimistic or resigned? It would not be unreasonable for the Christian to reason that leaving the family home puts the unbelieving partner outside the circle of gospel influence and much less likely to be saved. This could lead them to apply undue pressure on the unbeliever not to leave. But Paul's point seems to be not to argue in such limited and humanly-centered ways. You don't know whether staying in the marriage or leaving the family home is more likely to influence the unbeliever towards saving faith. Distance may be an asset, whereas insistence on remaining may impose an intolerable strain which is spiritually counter-productive. The Christian must have sufficient faith in God's sovereign grace and constant mercy to let the unbelieving partner go, if that is what they really want to do. The outcome is always in wiser, stronger hands than ours.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 7:17-40.