

Paul's Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage:
1 Corinthians 7:10-16, 39-40
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We're coming to the end of a sermon series on marriage, and in these last couple of messages I'm going to address the painful and sensitive issue of divorce and remarriage. This morning we'll study Paul's teaching on divorce and remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7, and next week we'll look at Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage in the Gospels.

I have been trembling at the thought of preaching these messages, because I know that it is a topic that stirs up intense emotional pain. Probably every person here has been touched in some way by the devastation of divorce. Maybe your grandparents were divorced, or an aunt and uncle, or close family friends. Maybe your own parents were divorced, and you grew up in a divided home, going back and forth between mom and dad. And maybe one or both of them got remarried, and there have been all kinds of new and awkward situations because of that. Maybe you have gone through a divorce, yourself, and you know the intense emotional agony of having the most intimate of human relationships severed.

So we all come to this issue with baggage. And we all come to this issue with presuppositions about why divorces happen and whether certain divorces and certain remarriages are legitimate or not. We've all certainly been influenced, to different degrees, by the culture around us, which says that divorce and remarriage is allowed for *any* reason. If you're no longer head over heels in love with the person you married, well, then, you can divorce them, because maybe you can find someone else who you'll be head over heels in love with. Sadly, that's the world's attitude, and we need to be very careful that we're not influenced by that. We need to check ourselves by looking carefully at what God's Word says about marriage and divorce and remarriage, and we need to pray that the Scriptures will trump our presuppositions.

This will be very difficult for some of us, because the assumptions are so ingrained, and the emotional pain runs so deep. I'm praying that God will do a mighty work among us to make us submissive to His Word even when it's most difficult to hear. And I pray that as we look closely and honestly at what the Word says, that marriages will be saved and strengthened—marriages that are rocky right now, marriages that will be rocky in the future, and even marriages that have not yet begun. I think of the youth and children who are here, and I want them to have a very high view of marriage so that they will not enter into it lightly.

In preaching on this subject, my desire is to speak the truth in love. This is a hard teaching. As I have studied these passages extensively over the last several months, I have been convinced that the standard here is extremely high. And yet I don't want to present this in a condemning or judgmental way. I want you to know that I tell you the truth from God's Word because I love you and want the best for you. I want us as a church to rejoice in God's good commands to us. I want us to understand the depth and glory of marriage as God designed it. I want Christ to be honored in our marriages. So my hope is to speak the truth in love.

And therefore I want to begin with the great Gospel truth that our sins are covered by the blood of Christ. If you have divorced your spouse, if you abandoned your spouse, if you have been remarried, if you have committed adultery or fornication, whatever your past sins may be, you need to know that through repentance and faith there is forgiveness for those sins. In whatever ways you have sinned against God by disobeying His commands for marriage, or any other way that you have sinned against God, let us all rejoice that God showed His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). We're all sinners here this morning. There's no one here who is sinless. There's no one here who can say, I don't need Christ's forgiveness. In that respect our study of this issue will be just like our study of other issues. We see the Bible's teaching, we see how we fall short, and we therefore repent of our past sins and mourn over those sins and seek God's sanctifying grace to act differently in the future. That's the Christian life. And I pray that as we come to this difficult and emotionally-charged topic of divorce and remarriage that our response will be the same—that we will see what the Bible teaches, and see how we have fallen short, and repent of our past sins and mourn over those sins and seek God's sanctifying grace to act differently in the future.

I want to read several verses from a passage that was our fighter verse passage recently. It's in Psalm 103, and let this just be a vivid reminder to us of God's grace and goodness and eagerness to forgive. You may hear this sermon and feel all kinds of guilt and shame and regret, and some of that will be appropriate. But don't remain there. Look to the cross where those sins were laid on Christ, and rejoice in His sacrifice for sinners like you and me.

Psalm 103 says, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The Lord works

righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." (Psalm 103:1-14, ESV)

I preached from 1 Corinthians 7 last week and focused on what Paul says about singleness. This morning we're in the same chapter, but we'll focus on what Paul teaches about divorce and remarriage.

The Permanence of Marriage

First I want to talk generally about how the Bible emphasizes the permanence of marriage, and then we'll get to some specific questions about divorce and remarriage that are addressed in this text.

Several weeks ago when we started this sermon series on marriage, the first passage we studied was Genesis 1-2. In Genesis 2:24 there's an amazing statement about the permanence of marriage. It says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." The two become one. And to try to rip apart a union like that is disastrous. God intended for one man and one woman to be united in this intimate and permanent way. It's a lifelong union.

That's why Jesus, when He was teaching on divorce, quoted Genesis 2:24 and then said, "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:8-9). In marriage, God has joined the husband and wife together. And since God is the one who has done the joining, He is the only One who can separate that union. He does that by death. When one spouse dies, the marriage is ended. And that is God's doing. No human being has the right to end a marriage. What God has joined together, let not man separate.

We also learned from Hosea that God's covenantal love for His people is so radical that He extends grace and goes after the wayward spouse even when there is adultery and abandonment. Gomer went after other lovers. She left Hosea, her husband. And the Lord instructed Hosea to go after her and redeem her. He bought her out of slavery and brought her home. That is the

redemptive story of God and His people, and it should be the redemptive story of our marriages as well.

In the wonderful words about marriage in Ephesians 5, which we also studied, we see that the story in Hosea is a foreshadowing of the great Gospel reality of Christ's marriage to the church. This is what marriage is all about. The union of a husband and wife is to be a picture of Christ's union with His bride, the church. And the permanence of marriage is so important in this respect because Christ will never, ever divorce His bride. That marriage will never be severed. Even as we pursue other lovers and sin against our Savior, He pursues us and redeems us. He never divorces His bride.

When a married couple divorces, it tells a lie to the world about Christ and the church. Christ and the church will never be divorced, therefore a husband and wife should never divorce.

Now we come to our passage in 1 Corinthians 7, and there is a repeated exhortation against divorce. In verses 10-11 it seems that Paul has in mind a husband and wife who are both professing believers, because he goes on in the next section to address marriages in which one spouse is a believer and the other is not. He says in verse 10, "the wife should not separate from her husband." I think he's using the word "separate" as a synonym for "divorce," because he then says at the end of verse 11, "and the husband should not divorce his wife." A command to the wife, and a command to the husband: Do not divorce!

In the next section Paul addresses a different situation where one spouse is a believer and the other spouse is not. We saw in 1 Peter 3 that Peter also had this situation in mind, specifically wives who have an unbelieving husband. Paul's thinking of the same situation, although he applies it both ways. This was a weighty question for the Corinthians. What should an individual do if they became a Christian, but their spouse still rejects the Gospel? Was it appropriate to stay married to an unbeliever? They were seriously wrestling with that question. But Paul says, Do not divorce! In verse 12, in the case of a believing husband and unbelieving wife, "he should not divorce her." In verse 13, in the case of a believing wife and an unbelieving husband, "she should not divorce him." So I just want to highlight the repeated exhortation against divorce. Four times in just these few verses, "the wife should not separate from her husband," "the husband should not divorce his wife," "he should not divorce her," "she should not divorce him."

In verse 14 Paul gives reasons why a believer should not divorce an unbelieving spouse. "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's statement here may sound strange, but the point is that the believer is not defiled by the unbeliever, but rather the unbeliever is sanctified by the believer. At the beginning of the chapter Paul quotes from a letter that the Corinthians sent to him, in which they said, "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." They thought that celibacy was inherently more spiritual, and they were apparently encouraging husbands and wives to stop having sex. With that view of sex and celibacy, you can imagine what the view would be when the situation was a believer married to an unbeliever. How could a believer be married to and sexually intimate with an enemy of the cross? Wouldn't that be defiling? Wouldn't that be unclean? And wouldn't that also be defiling to the children who would result from that marriage? Paul says no. The influence actually works in the opposite direction. The believer will have a sanctifying influence on the spouse and on the children. This doesn't mean that the spouse or the children are automatically washed of their sins just because of their relationship with the believer. But there is certainly the hope that they will be saved through the believer's godly influence. That's what verse 16 says. The hope is that they will be saved.

Therefore the command stands. No divorce. Even if your spouse is not a believer, you should not divorce.

Are there any exceptions?

Now we get to the more difficult questions. Are there any exceptions to these commands? We would probably all agree that divorce is bad and wrong. That's the clear biblical standard. However, most people would also say, But there are exceptions to the rule. Divorce should be avoided, that's clear from the Bible, but there are at least a couple biblical grounds for divorce. That's what most people would say, even most evangelical believers, maybe that's the assumption of most of you here this morning. The majority Protestant position is that adultery and abandonment are the two biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage. The innocent party in these cases is free to divorce and remarry.

As I've studied the relevant passages, I'm no longer convinced of that position. For a long time I simply assumed that position. I wanted to believe that position. But the more I've examined the Scriptures I don't believe that either of those cases (adultery or abandonment) are actually given as grounds for divorce and remarriage.

Let me try to explain. Next week we'll deal with the case of adultery, because Jesus says, "except for *porneia*" in Matthew 5 and Matthew 19, and we'll have to wrestle with what He means by *porneia* in those contexts. The issue for us this morning in 1

Corinthians 7 is the abandonment of an unbelieving spouse. This is the passage where many will say that Paul gives a basis for a person to divorce and remarry, if their unbelieving spouse deserts them.

Let me start by commenting on these curious parenthetical statements that Paul makes in verses 10 and 12. In verse 10 he says, “not I, but the Lord.” In verse 12 he says, “I, not the Lord.” What does this mean? Some people get tripped up on this and think that Paul is saying that some things he writes are inspired and other things are not. He says later in verse 25, “I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.” What he’s pointing out here is that in verses 10-11 he’s citing actual words of Jesus from His earthly ministry, whereas in the other places Paul doesn’t know of statements that Jesus made about those particular scenarios. But Paul’s writing, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is still just as true and authoritative as everything else in the Bible. As Paul says in verse 25, by the Lord’s mercy he is trustworthy. So all he’s saying in those parenthetical statements is that he knows of specific things Jesus said about the situation he addresses in verses 10-11, but he doesn’t know of specific things Jesus said about the other situations.

It’s really interesting to look at verses 10-11 in light of this. Paul is thinking of those statements of Jesus that are recorded for us in the Gospels where Jesus speaks emphatically and absolutely against divorce. Jesus says in Mark 10:11-12, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” Also Luke 16:18, “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.” Matthew has the same thing, but he also includes “except for *porneia*,” which I’ll talk about next week. But what’s really intriguing here in 1 Corinthians 7 is that Paul does not make any reference to that exception clause that is found only in Matthew. Look at verse 11 in our passage. Paul is making an exception-type statement. Verse 11 begins the same way verse 15 begins. “But if . . .” And it’s in the context of citing the teaching of Jesus. This would be a really natural place for Paul to cite the exception clause that’s found in Matthew. But he doesn’t.

He simply says, “if she does [that is, if she disobeys this command and does separate from her husband], she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.” There’s no mention of remarriage here. There’s no allowance for remarriage. She should be reconciled to her husband. Or if that’s not possible for whatever reason, she should remain unmarried.

Now let's look at the exception statement in verse 15. I'll read verses 15-16. "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. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" We're going to have to think carefully together about this, because these are hotly debated verses. This is, of course, a very intense topic, and there are also some complexities in trying to follow Paul's flow of thought here.

It's clear that he's giving some kind of exception. He is qualifying his previous statements in some way. He has said in verses 10-11, don't divorce. Then in verses 12-13 he's saying, even if your spouse is not a believer, don't divorce even in that situation, assuming your unbelieving spouse is willing to stay with you. But then there's this exception, which he's already been alluding to. In verse 12 he says, if she consents to live with him. In verse 13 he says, if he consents to live with her. So the question that surfaces and has to be answered is, what if the unbelieving spouse does *not* consent to stay with the believer?

That's the question Paul answers in verse 15. His answer is simply, let it be so—let the divorce happen. You should never initiate a divorce, but if your unbelieving spouse divorces you, there may not be anything you can do to stop it. You let it happen. Paul then writes, "In such cases the brother or sister is not *enslaved*." This is the statement that many take to mean, the brother or sister is free to remarry. In fact there are many Bible teachers whom I greatly respect who interpret the verse in that way. The brother or sister whose unbelieving spouse divorces them is not enslaved, meaning free to remarry.

Let me give three reasons why I think it should not be taken that way. I don't think this is giving an allowance for remarriage. First of all, the commands in verse 11 seem to directly contradict that interpretation. It's hard to believe that in verse 11 Paul would say, "remain unmarried or else be reconciled," and then in verse 15 say, "you don't need to be reconciled and you don't need to remain unmarried, indeed, you're free to remarry." That interpretation of verse 15 and the straightforward instruction of verse 11 just don't fit together.

Secondly, the word that Paul uses in verse 15 is different than the word he uses to refer to being bound in marriage. In verse 39 of this chapter he writes, "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives." And in Romans 7:2 he says the same thing, "a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives." The word used in both of those statements is different than the word in 1 Corinthians 15, "the brother or sister is not enslaved." It's possible that "not enslaved" means essentially the same thing

as “not bound,” but I don’t find any compelling evidence to think that. The evidence is in the opposite direction, as I pointed out in verse 11. So I don’t think we should read verse 15 as though it’s saying that the desertion of an unbeliever spouse is basically the same as the death of a spouse. In both cases the brother or sister is no longer bound, and free to remarry. I don’t think Paul is viewing those situations the same.

Verse 15 doesn’t say “bound,” but “enslaved.” And I think the most natural way to read that is “not enslaved to the commands in verses 12-13 that you shouldn’t divorce.” This is the exception to those commands. If the unbelieving spouse separates and desires divorce, then the brother or sister is not enslaved to that command. He or she should let the divorce happen. To take the next step and say that implies freedom to remarry, I think is unwarranted.

Thirdly, I think what follows the exception also argues in favor of not remarrying. Look at the last part of verse 15. It says, “God has called you to peace.” Some interpret this as a reason for allowing the marriage to dissolve. And so this last sentence of verse 15 is seen as part of the exception. You let the unbelieving partner separate, because God has called you to peace. Don’t fight it. Let it happen as peaceably as possible. That’s a possible way of reading it.

But I think it fits with the context a lot better to see the last sentence of verse 15 as connecting back to verses 12-14. The command is, Don’t divorce your unbelieving spouse. At least some of the Corinthians were prone to the kind of mentality that said you sever ties with all unbelievers even if you’re married to one. But Paul is saying, No, don’t divorce. God has called you to peace.

When you look at other exception statements, you can see that the logic makes perfect sense when you skip over the exception. For instance, in verses 10-11, “the wife should not separate from her husband . . . , and the husband should not divorce his wife.” The parenthetical exception is placed right in the middle of that. Or later in the chapter, in verse 21 where he addresses the issue of slavery and says, “Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. . . . [verse 22] For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord.” And in the middle of that is the parenthetical exception: “But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.” Do you see how the “For” at the beginning of verse 22 does not connect to the exception, but to the statement before it?

I think Paul’s doing the same thing in verse 15. There’s the brief exception statement, and then he jumps right back to the flow of thought started in verse 12. You stay with your unbelieving

spouse. God has called you to peace. And in addition to that, God might even use you as a means of your spouse's salvation. Verse 16 picks up the theme of verse 14 and takes it to another level. Not only does your life have a general sanctifying affect in your family (verse 14), but it might even result in your spouse being saved (verse 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?" That's a reason to stay in a marriage, even if that marriage is difficult. And it's even a reason to stay unmarried when an unbelieving spouse divorces you. Maybe there will be reconciliation. Maybe they will see your peaceful hope in the Lord and be changed by that. You don't know what the Lord will do. But the whole thrust of this passage is clearly against divorce, and it's even against remarriage after divorce.

Is Remarriage Ever Legitimate?

The last question for us to consider is whether remarriage is ever legitimate? The answer is yes, in one situation. This is what Paul addresses at the end of the chapter, in verses 39-40. "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God."

I'll also read Romans 7:2-3 where Paul says something very similar. "For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress."

This is the one instance where remarriage is perfectly permissible. If the spouse dies, the marriage is over. God has ended it. And therefore remarriage is allowed.

The Gospel

As I close I want to come back to what I said at the beginning. Some of you may be agonizing over past sins. Maybe you wrongfully divorced your spouse. Maybe you wrongfully got remarried. Maybe you have dishonored and disobeyed God's commands for marriage in other ways. But whatever the situation, God's grace is sufficient to cover those sins.

I do need to say this: if you are divorced and remarried, you should not divorce again in order to reunite with your first spouse. Some people hear this teaching and think that they need to end the marriage they are currently in so they can make things right with the first marriage. That's not what God calls you to do. I'll say

more about this next week. Two wrongs don't make a right. What you should do, rather, is be committed to the marriage you are in right now. Make this marriage as Christ-honoring as it can be. Pray that, by God's grace, you will never divorce again.

What we've seen in 1 Corinthians 7 this morning is a hard teaching, and yet also a wonderful teaching. It's a hard teaching because it goes against our sense of autonomy and our pursuit of happiness. We want to live a happy, fulfilled life according to our definitions, and we don't want anyone to tell us what to do. God's Word gives us a very high standard for marriage, and that may be hard for us to hear. But it's also a wonderful thing for us to hear. Because, as we've learned, human marriage points to Christ's marriage to the church, and the great assurance we have in the Gospel is that Christ will never, ever divorce His bride. Christ will always be faithful to His bride, even when she commits adultery against Him, even when she deserts Him. And our marriages are supposed to tell that story. Our temporal marriages are supposed to be a pointer to that one eternal marriage, a pointer to the permanence of Christ's marriage to the church.