

Series: *Biblical Separation*

Title: "Separation: A Spouse's Witness" (1 Corinthians 7:10-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/12/2015

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If you have been listening to our recent broadcasts then you know that for the last several messages we have been focusing on one of the most challenging aspects of the Christian life.

It is a challenge that many of us face – the challenge of living a spiritually separated life as a Christian, a life that is separated from the patterns of this present evil world, and separated unto that which pleases our holy God, when we are living under the same roof with unbelievers.

Many Christians are in this position. A Christian husband living with an unbelieving wife. A Christian wife living with an unbelieving husband. Perhaps an unbelieving father or mother or sister or brother in the household. And for those of us who are believers who may not have this kind of a situation under our own roof, quite often we face the challenge of living a spiritually separated life and bearing witness for Christ and for the Gospel and for the Word of God before members of our extended families who are not believers.

We have been focusing in recent messages on a passage of Scripture in the book of First Corinthians in which God the Holy Spirit gives us instruction and equips us to deal with such situations. That passage is found in the book of First Corinthians chapter 7, beginning at verse 10.

As we begin today, let me read that passage for you once again. And if you are able to do so as you are listening, I hope that you will turn with me to First

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Corinthians chapter 7 beginning at verse 10. God the Holy Spirit through the pen of the Apostle Paul gives us this instruction:

Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.

Now let me stop at this point and remind you once again that the Apostle Paul is here restating the teaching of the Lord Jesus on marriage and divorce in the Gospel records. But then Paul under the inspiration of the Spirit goes on to give us further instruction that is rooted in the teachings of our Lord. Verse 12:

But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.

For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband?

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Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches.

Confusion In the Church

Now as we looked at this passage in our last message, we saw that there is a significant difference between God's instruction to Israel about spiritual separation in the Old Testament, under the Old Covenant, and God's instruction to Christians living for the last 2000 years under the New Covenant, the New Testament dispensation.

Now you may be wondering why we are spending time on this. The reason is that today many Christians are confused on this issue. Many Christians are confused about God's instructions regarding marriage and divorce, and God's instructions concerning the practice of spiritual separation for Christians who are living in a spiritually mixed household.

And why is that? I submit to you that it is because many churches are giving people confused and un-Biblical teaching and counsel on this matter. And this confusion manifests itself in two different ways.

On the one hand, some Christians are in effect still trying to live under the Old Covenant. That is what they are being told to do. And that is wrong. On the other hand, other Christians simply do not understand what it means to live under the New

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Covenant in a spiritually mixed household or a spiritually mixed extended family.

And so, while on the one hand, those who are still trying to live under the Old Covenant are keeping themselves under a bondage that God does not intend for Christians, on the other hand, many Christians are taking liberties in their lives that God does not sanction.

Many Christians today don't understand that there is a difference in the implementation of the doctrine of spiritual separation in the home and in the family under the New Covenant versus the Old Covenant. They don't understand why God has made this difference. They don't understand why this difference is vital. And they don't understand their place in the plan of God in this matter.

Now I want to assure you that we are not merely focusing on some obscure detail of theology. This is vital, practical truth. It is truth on which God calls upon us to base our lives and our testimonies.

The Corinthian Situation

In our very last message, we focused our attention on the fact that here in First Corinthians chapter 7 the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul is instructing New Testament believers to deal with the situation of being in a marriage relationship with an unbelieving spouse, or being in a home with unbelieving children, in a different way than we find in the Old Testament.

We have to keep in mind the fact that the believers to whom the Apostle Paul

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was writing were living in a time when the writing of the Bible was not yet complete. They were relying primarily on the 39 books of the Old Testament. And it was from the 39 books of the Old Testament that Jesus and the apostles instructed the believers in the Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be found in abundance in the Old Testament, dear friends.

But at the same time, the Holy Spirit through the apostles was giving the church new teachings because of the new situation. The Old Covenant economy had passed away. The Old Covenant had been done away with in Christ. As Jesus celebrated that last Passover with His disciples on the night in which He was betrayed, the night before He went to the cross, as Jesus held the cup before them, He said, "[T]his is My blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28).

The New Covenant era had begun. The Old Covenant, with all of its regulations and ceremonies, was even at that very moment passing away. And dear friends, it is vital for us to understand that. It is a grievous sin for Christians not to recognize that there is a great difference between life under the Old Covenant and life under the New. Now the question is, how does this apply to the situation of a believer today, living in a spiritually mixed household or family?

Israel's Lack of Separation

As I told you in our last message, in the Old Testament, in the book of Ezra, we find the remnant of the people of Israel coming back into the Promised Land after

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their 70 years of exile. And Ezra and the other leaders brought the people together in a solemn assembly. They read the Law of God to them. They explained it to them. Why? So that they would obey the Law of God carefully as they came back into the land again. Ezra and Nehemiah and the others wanted to ensure that the people who were coming back into the land would not fall into the same kinds of sins for which God had put them out of the land 70 years before.

The most grievous sin in the eyes of God, the sin that God through the prophets repeatedly chastised Israel for over many centuries, was their sin of lack of spiritual separation. That lack of separation manifested itself in their constant idolatry. The people of Israel and of Judah were constantly intermarrying with the people of the pagan nations surrounding them, contrary to God's command.

And as a result of those intermarriages, and as a result of political and military alliances that Israel made with the surrounding pagan nations, Israel embraced the false gods and the horrible idolatrous worship of the surrounding nations. God hated this. And frequently, God's wrath broke out against Israel because of their refusal to practice spiritual separation.

Why Separation Was Vital Under the Old Covenant

Why was this such a vital matter to God? We find the answer in the book of Leviticus. In Leviticus chapter 26, we find that the Lord speaks to the people of Israel and He reminds them that He has consented to come and dwell with them in

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the Promised Land. He says, in Leviticus chapter 26 verse 12, "I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people."

But then later in the same chapter, God tells them that they must keep the land in which He is going to walk among them, and dwell with them over the mercy seat of the Holy of Holies – they must keep the land free from idolatry. He says to them, If you do not obey Me and observe My commandments, and if you despise My statutes, or your soul abhors My judgments, so that you break My covenant, I will set My face against you. And if you persist in such disobedience, I will drive you out of the land.

And so it was for this reason that marriages between the Israelites and the surrounding pagans were considered to be illegitimate marriages in the eyes of God. And the children of those marriages were considered to be illegitimate children. And so when the Israelites came back into the Promised Land after the years of captivity, many of them brought their pagan wives and the children of their spiritually mixed marriages back into the land with them.

And as they heard the Law of God read to them, they understood that these things were wrong in the eyes of God, and that the land could not be free of spiritual pollution unless they divorced their pagan wives and put away their children.

And so in the book of Ezra, we find that that is exactly what they did. It was a difficult time in the history of Israel. There was much grief and sorrow because

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they realized that this had to be done. But they did it. They wanted the land to be holy.

Dear friends, we speak of that part of the world today as the Holy Land without really understanding the significance of that in the eyes of God under the Old Testament economy. It was indeed to be the Holy Land. The spiritually separated land. A land inhabited by a spiritually separated people. The focus was upon the land, because God dwelled in the land.

The New Covenant Imperatives

But under the New Covenant, we have a very different situation. God no longer dwells in a temple made with hands. God no longer dwells on a hilltop in Jerusalem. Under the New Covenant, each believer in the Lord Jesus Christ is the temple of the living God. God dwells within us. And so, whereas under the Old Covenant the focus was on the land as the dwelling place of God being holy, under the New Covenant the focus is upon us ourselves as the dwelling place of God, and the necessity of we ourselves being holy.

Under the Old Covenant, because the focus was upon the land, there were not to be intermarriages with the pagans. Now under the New Covenant, God still instructs us as Christians not to knowingly marry an unbeliever. Some Christians still do that. That is not pleasing in the eyes of God. But that does not mean that God cannot work even in that situation to bring about the salvation of the unbelieving spouse.

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But many people also become Christians after marriage. One partner in the marriage becomes a Christian, while the other remains an unbeliever. That was a common situation in the Corinthian church, which was why the Apostle Paul was writing these instructions to them.

And so Paul is saying this to New Testament believers under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: Do not leave your unbelieving spouse. Do not abandon your unbelieving children. Why? Because you are the temple of the living God. God is living within you. And so the vital thing is for you to keep yourself as the dwelling place of God spiritually separate.

A Privileged Relationship

You are to do that for two reasons. The first reason is because God commands us to walk in holiness before Him. The second reason is that God commands us to walk in holiness before the unbeliever. The Apostle Paul is telling the Corinthian believers, and telling us, that God has placed you and the unbelievers in your household, in your family, in a unique position, a unique relationship. Notice again verse 14 of First Corinthians chapter 7:

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

What does it mean for the unbelieving husband to be "sanctified" by the wife,

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or for the unbelieving wife to be "sanctified" by the husband? Let me tell you first of all what it does not mean. It does not mean that the mere fact that an unbelieving spouse is married to a Christian makes that unbelieving spouse a Christian. The Holy Spirit through Paul is not speaking of salvation when He uses this word.

The sense in which the word "sanctified" is used here has to do with the fact that God has placed the unbelieving spouse in a situation of a very privileged and continual exposure to the Gospel. And because of the grace of God shed upon the believing spouse, the unbelieving spouse will be the continual beneficiary of the blessings of God upon that believing spouse. The Lord looks after those who are His.

And so it is also for the children in that household. The children also are in a situation of a very privileged and continual exposure to the Gospel, and the continual beneficiaries of the blessings of God upon their believing parent.

And so, the Holy Spirit says through Paul in verse 16,

[H]ow do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or
how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

Once again, we need to be careful to understand the language here. The original language is not saying that the believing spouse does the saving. Only God saves a soul. The word that is translated "save" in this particular case, has to do with the believing spouse being God's instrument in bringing about the salvation of the

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unbelieving spouse.

As the believing spouse lives a spiritually separated life, and holds forth the testimony of the Gospel in the home as the very temple of the living God, Paul is saying that God may well use that life, that witness, that testimony, to bring the unbelieving spouse to the point of understanding his or her own need of Christ, bringing that unbelieving spouse, by the work of the Spirit, to the point of repentance toward God and faith in Christ.

Living In That Hope

Dear friends, I know many Christian wives and husbands who are living a spiritually separated life before an unbelieving husband or wife with that kind of hope.

After one of the previous messages in this series, we heard from a lady who lives in the southern United States who has been married to a Muslim husband for 33 years. This lady came to know the Lord 15 years ago. And she testifies that it is only by the Lord's saving grace that she has three daughters who are Christians.

She testifies to the fact that it is not easy to remain in this marriage. But, she says, I know it is God's will. I ask God to forgive me for my shortcomings and pray that I can be a better example of Christ. And she testifies that happiness and peace are not to be found in the promises that the world would offer, but that even in her present circumstances God has given her a rest and a peace that passes all

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understanding. And in writing to us she quoted a number of Scriptures that are a source of comfort and encouragement to her in this difficult circumstance.

Back in my college days, I knew a lady who lived for many years with an unbelieving husband who was involved in organized crime. He was involved in deep wickedness. She lived a spiritually separated life before him. She lived with him despite his opposition to the Gospel. And she prayed for his salvation for 24 years.

And then one day that man gloriously came to faith in Christ. And that man became an outstanding witness for Christ for the rest of his days. He became the assistant director of an inner-city rescue mission, witnessing to other men who were still leading the kind of ungodly life that he had led. And some of his children became missionaries for Christ in other countries.

I also know a lady, in fact we spoke with her just this week, whose husband left her some time ago. She was a Roman Catholic, but since that time she has come to true saving faith in Christ. And it is her prayer, and her hope, that even now her husband will return. She is still in communication with him. And so she is endeavoring to live the light of the Gospel before him.

As the Holy Spirit says, "How do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?" How do you know that you will not be the instrument that God will use for the salvation of the soul of the one who is dearest to you?

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As the Holy Spirit says through the Apostle Paul in Ephesians chapter 3, God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, [and therefore] to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

About the Broadcast

The Scripture-Driven Church airs each week across the United States and around the world. Our goal is to obey Christ's Great Commission: preaching the Gospel to all, and equipping believers in Christ to live every area of life by the sole authority of Scripture, to the glory of our Lord and Savior.

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