

Challenges Christians Face

Guidelines for Marriage

1 Corinthians 7:8-16

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August 21, 2011

Guidelines for Marriage

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of marriage. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Guidelines for Marriage."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 7:8-16:

⁸To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. ⁹But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

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.

¹²To 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. ¹⁴For 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. ¹⁵But 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. ¹⁶For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7:8-16)

Introduction

Have you ever stuck out like a sore thumb?

Commentator Richard Pratt tells the story of a pastor and his wife who found themselves sticking out like a sore thumb.

They had just moved from Dallas, Texas, to a small city in the South. When they first arrived, a kind family hosted a reception for the new pastor and his wife. The invitations read, “Come to our house and meet our new pastor.” At the bottom of the invitation the instructions were written: “Dress—Casual.”

“That’s great,” the pastor thought to himself. He had been in a coat and tie all week. Now he had a chance to dress like he did in Dallas. He and his wife wore blue jeans, snakeskin jackets, and big cowboy hats. That was how they dressed casually in Dallas.

But when the hostess of the reception opened the door, they learned something very quickly. She appeared in an evening gown and her husband stepped out in a suit and tie. Dressing casually in this town meant something slightly less than a tuxedo.

That evening the new pastor and his wife felt like they stuck out like a sore thumb. Everyone looked at them and rolled their eyes. As they shook hands, everyone tried hard to look straight in their eyes and not to look at their inappropriate clothing.

“It was a nightmare,” the wife said. “I’m still embarrassed when I see those people.”

As western culture continues to change by moving away from its Christian roots, Christians are going to feel like that new couple in town. In many ways, our lifestyles will seem increasingly odd and old-fashioned. This is especially true in the Christian practice of marriage. As Christians commit themselves to observing what Paul said in this chapter about marriage, we will stand out from the crowd. We will stick out like a sore thumb.¹

The Corinthian church struggled with issue of marriage. They wrote to Paul wanting to know what they were to do. Chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians is Paul’s answer to the various concerns that were raised about marriage.

¹ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 111.

Lesson

In our lesson today, Paul sets down several guidelines for marriage.² They are:

1. Guidelines for single Christians (7:8-9)
2. Guidelines for Christians married to Christians (7:10-11)
3. Guidelines for Christians married to non-Christians who want to stay married (7:12-14)
4. Guidelines for Christians married to non-Christians who do not want to stay married (7:15-16)

I. Guidelines for Single Christians (7:8-9)

First, note the guidelines for single Christians.

Paul addressed his letter in verse 8a: **“To the unmarried and the widows. . . .”**

These are two categories of single people. In verse 25 he also mentioned a third category: “the betrothed” (also called “virgins” in many Bible versions). Knowing the distinction between these three categories is important in understanding this passage.

“The betrothed” (*parthenon*) in verse 25 clearly refers to single people who have never been married.

“The widows” (*cherais*) in verse 8a refers to single people whose spouses had died.

But who are **“the unmarried”** in verse 8a? The word Paul used for **“the unmarried”** (*agamois*) is used only four times in the New Testament, and all four are here in this chapter. Clearly **the unmarried** are not single people who have never been married because Paul addressed them in verse 25. And since Paul addressed **“the unmarried and the widows”** in this verse, we can conclude that **the unmarried** are not **widows**. The best way to understand who Paul is referring to is by looking at the word in verses 10 and

² The material for today’s lesson is taken from John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 161-69.

11, where Paul said, “. . . the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain *unmarried*. . .).” The word “unmarried” there refers to a divorced woman. So, “**the unmarried**” in verse 8a are divorced people who are now single.

So, Paul addressed single Christians who were divorced and widowed. That is, they were formerly married. He said to them in verse 8b, “**I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am.**” I want you to note two things about Paul’s statement.

First, Paul implied that he himself had been formerly married. I mentioned to you last time that Paul was most likely married because he was a Pharisee, and marriage was one of the requirements for membership in the Sanhedrin. His statement to the formerly married confirms that when he said, “. . . **as I am.**” Paul was probably a widower. He does not identify himself with any other group but this one—the formerly married.

And second, Paul wanted single Christians who were formerly married to know that **it is good for them to remain single**. There is no need to rush back in to marriage. Marriage is not necessary or superior to singleness. From time to time Christians who become divorced or widowed rush into marriage, and sometimes it turns out to be a disaster. Paul simply wanted formerly married people to know that being single is okay.

“**But**” he continued in verse 9, “**if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.**” Single Christians who do not have the gift of singleness and who are burning with sexual desire should get married.

It seems wise that once two single Christians decide to get married they should do it rather quickly. The longer a couple waits before the wedding day, the more they are going to struggle to stay sexually pure. And, as John MacArthur says, “The practical problems of an early marriage are not nearly as serious as the danger of immorality.”³

³ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 164.

Challenges Christians Face

But what about the Christian who does not have the gift of singleness and is burning with sexual desire but has no immediate prospects for a husband or wife? What should that person do? Let me suggest several things that a Christian in this situation could do.

First, recognize that it is never God's will for a Christian to marry a non-Christian. In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul said, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers" (6:14a). Let me say to you young people that you should not even seriously date a non-Christian. Ordinarily, dating leads to marriage, so make sure that you date a Christian.

Second, don't just marry the first Christian who will say *yes*. Though you may want to be married very much, be careful. When you are emotionally involved in a relationship, your judgment may not be the best. That is why it is good to determine beforehand that you will listen to wise and godly counsel. Look for a Christian you can love, trust, and respect, letting marriage come as a response to that commitment of love. People who simply want to get married for the sake of getting married run a great risk of marrying the wrong person.

Third, it is okay to look for the "right" person, but the best way to *find* the right person is to *be* the right person. In other words, put your energy into growing as a Christian. Don't stop growing as a Christian just because you want to get married. If you are growing as a Christian and if it is God's will for you to be married, then he will send the right person into your life at the right time.

Fourth, until the right person comes into your life, direct your energy in ways that will keep your mind off temptation. Two of the best ways, says John MacArthur, are spiritual service and physical activity.⁴ Don't put yourself into situations which increase the temptation. Find ways to be active that are helpful and good.

Fifth, until God brings the right person into your life, keep in mind that he will provide you with strength to resist the temptation.

⁴ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 164.

Later in this letter Paul said, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (10:13).

And finally, until God brings the right person into your life, strive to be content. Paul said to the Philippians, “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content” (4:11).

So, these are the guidelines for single Christians.

II. Guidelines for Christians Married to Christians (7:10-11)

Second, let’s look at the guidelines for Christians married to Christians.

Paul said in verse 10a: “**To the married I give this charge. . .**” Paul never gave instructions to non-Christians, and so **the married** in view here are Christians.

You may have noticed that this **charge** is from the Lord and not Paul. He said, “To the married I give this charge (**not I, but the Lord**). . . .” In verse 12 he said, “. . . (I, not the Lord).” What does that mean? In verse 10 Paul is referencing teaching that Jesus himself gave, whereas in verse 12 Paul does not reference Jesus because Jesus never taught on that particular matter. The point is that in both instances the **charge** is authoritative because the apostle Paul is writing under the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Paul gave the following guideline to Christian wives in verse 10b: “**the wife should not separate from her husband.**” And he gave a similar guideline to Christian husbands in verse 11b: “**and the husband should not divorce his wife.**”

Notice that Paul used the word **separate** for wives and the word **divorce** for husbands. The words **separate** and **divorce** were not distinguished in Paul’s day as they are in many cultures today. To **separate** was to **divorce**.

It is not clear why the Corinthians wanted to divorce their

spouses. In light of verse 1 it is possible that some Christians thought that they could live more holy lives if they were single again. Whatever the reason, Paul said that Christians were not to divorce each other.

Jesus allowed for divorce. According to Jesus, sexual immorality was one legitimate ground for divorce when he said in Matthew 19:9, “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another, commits adultery.”

Paul also allowed for divorce. We will look at it in just a moment in verse 15 where he gave desertion by a non-Christian as another legitimate ground for divorce.

Apart from the two grounds of sexual immorality and desertion by a non-Christian for divorce, Paul stated plainly that Christians must remain married to each other.

However, Paul was realistic enough to know that unbiblical divorces happen among Christians. For cases of unbiblical divorces, the Christian has two choices: **remain unmarried or else be reconciled** (7:11a) to the original spouse. The reason is that in God’s eyes the union has never been broken.

Paul did not comment on what to do if attempts to reconcile are rejected. The rest of Scripture and Christian prudence must guide in those situations.

So, these are the guidelines for Christians married to Christians.

III. Guidelines for Christians Married to Non-Christians Who Want to Stay Married (7:12-14)

Third, let’s look at the guidelines for Christians married to non-Christians who want to stay married.

Paul addressed **the rest**, that is, Christians married to non-Christians in verse 12a. He taught that Christians should not divorce their non-Christian spouses if they want to stay married.

He first addressed Christian husbands in verse 12b, “. . . **if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents**

to live with him, he should not divorce her.”

He then similarly addressed Christian wives in verse 13, **“If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.”**

Even though Christians are unequally yoked with non-Christians, they should not divorce them if the non-Christian spouses want to stay married.

The reason Christians are not to initiate divorce with their non-Christian spouses is given in verse 14: **“For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband.”** The word **“holy”** denotes being made special or set apart for God’s use or purposes (see 1 Timothy 4:5; Hebrews 9:13; 1 Peter 3:15). This does not mean that the non-Christian has acquired salvation. If they had, they would no longer be **unbelieving**. From Paul’s perspective, as long as the marriage is maintained the potential for realizing their salvation remains. Non-Christian spouses are exposed to the gospel in a way that they would not be if they were not in a relationship with a Christian spouse. Sometimes these non-Christian spouses eventually become believers, but not in every instance.

When Christians remain married to non-Christians, their children are also **“holy”** as Paul said at the end of verse 14, **“Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.”** That is, they too are set apart for God and are exposed to the gospel in a way that they would not be if they did not have a Christian parent.

So, these are the guidelines for Christians married to non-Christians who want to stay married.

IV. Guidelines for Christians Married to Non-Christians Who Do Not Want to Stay Married (7:15-16)

And fourth, note the guidelines for Christians married to non-Christians who do not want to stay married.

Despite the potential for positive influence from Christians in

mixed marriages, Paul knew the reality that non-Christians often do not want to stay in these marriages. Therefore, he said in verse 15a, **“But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so.”**

This is the second legitimate ground for divorce that I mentioned earlier. When a non-Christian divorces a Christian, that is a biblically legitimate ground for divorce. We call that desertion by a non-Christian, and that is a legitimate ground for divorce. That is why Paul said in verse 15b, **“In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved.”**

There are in fact three ways in which the covenant bond of marriage is broken. One is by sexual immorality (Matthew 19:9), the second is desertion by a non-Christian (1 Corinthians 7:15), and the third is by death (Romans 7:2). When the bond of marriage is broken by one of these three ways, a Christian is free to remarry. Throughout Scripture, whenever a legitimate divorce occurs, remarriage is assumed. Where divorce is permitted, remarriage is also permitted. It is clearly forbidden in verse 11, but here in this verse it is permitted.

God allows divorce when a non-Christian does not want to stay married because **“God has called you to peace”** (7:15c). If the non-Christian spouse cannot tolerate the Christian’s faith and desires to be free from the marriage, it is better that the marriage be dissolved in order to preserve the peace of the Christian. Pastor John MacArthur rightly says that “fighting, turmoil, bickering, criticism, and frustration disrupt the harmony and peace that God wants his children to have.”⁵ But, note however, that this is a concession and not a command.

A **wife** has no assurance that she **will save her husband**, and a **husband** no assurance that he **will save his wife** (7:16). We do not know how God will use Christians in the lives of their non-Christian spouses. While it is true that Christian spouses do influence their non-Christian spouses to embrace the gospel, that is not always the case. So, **God has called you to peace.**

⁵ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 168.

So, these are the guidelines for Christians married to non-Christians who do not want to stay married.

Conclusion

Let me summarize Paul's guidelines for marriage.

First, Paul's guidelines for single (that is formerly married) Christians is as follows:

- It is good to remain single.
- But, if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry.

Second, Paul's guidelines for Christians married to Christians is as follows:

- They must not divorce each other.
- However, if an unbiblical divorce takes place, only two options are open to the Christian: to remain unmarried or else to be reconciled to the original spouse.

Third, Paul's guidelines for Christians married to non-Christians who want stay married is as follows:

- Christians should not divorce their non-Christian spouses who want to stay married.

And fourth, Paul's guidelines for Christians married to non-Christians who do not want to stay married is as follows:

- If the non-Christian spouse wants a divorce, let it be so.

There is a great amount of content in this section of Paul's letter. It is important for us to know what the Bible teaches on a subject that impacts every single one of us directly or indirectly.

May God help us take these guidelines for marriage to heart.
Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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Challenges Christians Face

PRAAYER:

Our God, we live in a day in which marriage is attacked on every side. Teach us your truth regarding marriage and grant us strength to delight in the treasure you have given to us.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go into the world and affirm God's guidelines for marriage.