

Date: 11/26/06

Text: 1 Corinthians 7:1-16

Title: House Rule for God's Family

Theme: Since God established marriage, therefore we are to hold it in honor.

Introduction:

20 years ago if we were to ask any Christian or minister in China about their greatest needs, the answer would have been: we need more bibles. Now, 20 years later, the answer is: we need help in our marriages. How times have changed. In some Chinese cities, after completing a 72-hour crash course, you can get a license and start working as a professional counselor.

This is a global problem. In many countries and cities, 1 out of two marriages ends up in divorce. I am certain that every one of us here has been affected by the divorce of a close friend or family member. Family pictures taken 10 or 15 years ago are often outdated because of divorce. We become suspicious of weddings, wondering how long this one will last. Many young people are deferring their marriages because of the fear of failure. There are more and more couples just simply living together without marriage. Some of us may find ourselves in the midst of marital problems, confused about the direction we should take.

As I shared with you on different occasions, when we feel bewildered and confused in life, we need to come back to God's word, to the scriptures. This morning as I cautiously address some marital issues, I will do my best to explain what is in the Bible. At the same time I also recognize the complexity of some of our situations. While on the one hand we want to uphold God's word as the final authority in Faith and Life, and on the other, we are to avoid over simplification, providing a simple formula that will fit all situations.

Before we go to 1 Corinth 7:1-16, we want to take a look at its relationship with the rest of the scriptures. At the very beginning of human history, God said, “²⁴Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” This is known as God establishing the institution of marriage, expressing his intent and purpose for

marriage. It is an universal statement; affecting all mankind. As we continue to read on in the OT, we see examples of God's purpose for marriage being implemented or ignored. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had failed in this aspect. Proverbs 31 is a good example of what marriage and family are meant to be. Then the Songs of Solomon, an example of a husband and wife, expressing their love for one another and their oneness in marriage.

When we come to the NT, there is a shift in emphasis. Instead of examples, we are given specific instructions on how to apply God's purpose for marriage. Jesus' teaching in the gospels, apostle Paul and Peter in their writings, including today's passage, taught us how to “²⁴..... leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” So, in Genesis, God told us of his purpose for marriage. In the rest of the OT, we are shown positive and negative examples of how man applied God's purpose for marriage in life. Then in the NT, we are given instructions on how to maintain and achieve such oneness and unity.

In our study of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, we learn that Corinth was saturated with sexual immorality. It had certainly affected the Corinthian believers and their marriages. So in chapters 5,6 and 7, we find Paul's most extensive treatment on the subject of sexual immorality, marriage and singlehood. Two Sundays ago we addressed the issue of sexual immorality. This morning, we want to listen to what the Holy Spirit through Paul will speak to us about marriage. This passage is full of should's, ought's and other imperatives. It will do us well to pay attention to them. Paul stressed that the church, the believers belong to God, so our conduct is to governed by God's rules. When we are in God's family, we are to abide with his house rules. One of his house rules is that Since marriage is established by God, we must treat it with utter respect and honor.

I. Since God established marriage, we are to recognize that it is for the good of all.

The Corinthian church had previously written Paul about a special situation in their community. We are not given the details, only Paul's response. v1, ".....It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." Paul is saying in your situation, it is better to remain unmarried. Yet, immediately, in vs. 2, "²But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband." He is affirming the importance and necessity of marriage; the general rule God set for his creation. He then explained that the reason marriage is good is to minimize temptation and sexual immorality. Certainly, marriage is more than sexual intimacy. In addition, we also learn in Genesis that another reason for marriage is procreation.

So Paul is saying, there are situations where one may want to remain unmarried. However, as a general rule, marriage is good and necessary. Furthermore, in vs.3,4 we are to note two principles:

1. Marital equality. 3,4

3,4, "³The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴For 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." The first principle: husband and wife are totally equal in marriage. This is a shocker in the first century world. In that society, the husband had the total right over his wife. She was his property, he owned her. He could dispose her at his will for any reason. We have seen in an early sermon that not cooking well was ground for divorce.

Isn't it true that even to this day, in many marriages the wife is seen as less equal than the husband? Because of this, we see so many family problems resulting in unhappy wives. Husbands show no respect for their wives; husbands using wives as an outlet for anger; or using her as a sex object, gratifying his own physiological needs, making wives feel like a prostitute.

But this is not God's purpose for marriage; the husband and wife are equal in marriage.

Husband's and wife's bodies belong to each other. Therefore, there is to be mutual respect and love.

2. Sexual responsibility.

The second principle we see in this passage is sexual responsibility in a marriage. In that 1st century, because of the rampant sexual immorality, there were two extremes in the church. One was total freedom. Paul addressed this issue in chapter 6. The other extreme was to abstain from sexual intercourse, even in marriage. In vs.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.” Paul clearly stated that sexual intimacy is expected and required between husbands and wives. This was best illustrated in the Song of Solomon. If both husband and wife agreed to abstain from sex for a short period of time so they can concentrate on praying, then it is ok. But this is only temporary. Sexual intimacy is very important in marriage. Both husband and wife have the responsibility to meet each other's sexual needs . What does this mean to us?

First, we are not to use sex as a means for control. Since you didn't do this for me, therefore I am withholding sex from you. Or, if you want me to do this for you, you must first give me what I want. This is wrong. Sex must not be used to control our spouse. Secondly, when we experience difficulty in sexual intimacy with our spouse, we are to do our best to seek help to overcome such barriers so that our spouse will not be left with unmet needs. And thirdly, I feel many of us will have to seriously think about those long term overseas or out of town job assignments. I know some time it is difficult to turn down a company's offer. But what about God's rule for his children? Where is our priority?

II. Since God established marriage, we are to recognize the possibility of singlehood.

In verse 6, 10, 12 we have these words, “⁶Now as a concession, not a command, I say this.....¹⁰To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord):....¹²To the rest I say (I, not the Lord)...” What does this mean? Paul is making a distinction here that there are topics Jesus had taught. Such as divorce and remarriage. There are also some topics that Jesus did not teach, but Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to instruct the believers. This does not make Paul’s teaching any less authoritative than Jesus’. He, being an apostle speaks what Jesus wants him to speak. Therefore his teaching is equally inspired and authoritative.

Here Paul briefly touched upon the issue of singlehood. He will go into greater detail later in the chapter. In vs.7-9, “⁷I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.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 be aflame with passion.” Yes, as a general rule, marriage is desirable and good for all. But living in a sinful and broken world, there are times that singlehood is an option. Paul also recognized that to remain unmarried is a gift from God. Not everyone has this gift.

Here we see a principle at work. We are to avoid the mistake of over valuing either the married life or singlehood. There needs to be a balance. Sometimes we make the single people feel as if they are second class citizens. They have missed out the best in life. We put undue pressure on them that they have to be married, if not, there is something wrong. Every time we see them, we ask, is there someone on your radar? Or we try to match them up. Yes, we may have all the good intentions, but it is important to maintain a proper balance. I feel many churches, even including this one, have erred on this. We may advertise our church as a family friendly church. Or we have this and that family fellowship. There is nothing wrong with these per se, but often the single people may feel out of place. There needs to be a broader definition of

family. In this and other churches, any family groups must include both married and unmarried. We must not see each other via the eye of marriage. Yes, as a general rule, marriage is good, but being single is also a special gift from God. We'll look at this topic closely in a later sermon.

III. Since God established marriage, we are to recognize its permanency.

Vs.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.” In Genesis 2:24 we read that husband and wife are to be one. Jesus in Matthew 19:6 said, “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”. So Paul is repeating Jesus' teaching that husbands and wives are not to consider divorce. Marriage is meant to be permanent. This truth has resonated throughout the human history in all cultures. Therefore the norm for marriage is permanence, while separation or divorce is not the norm.

However, knowing human sinfulness and brokenness, scripture also spells out certain conditions where divorce is permissible. I will just briefly summarize what I have shared with you in an earlier sermon. Jesus specifically pointed out that adultery is a legitimate reason for divorce. Paul in this passage mentioned desertion by spouse as another reason for divorce. In addition to these two, it is important for us to recognize when a spouse's life is being threatened, it is violating a law that is basic to all life: the sanctity of human life. As a rule, marriage is meant to be permanent.

Paul then proceeds to address some specific situations facing the Corinthian believers.

1. Seek reconciliation. How about those who are already divorced? There is this simple guideline. If the divorce does not fall under the provisions such as adultery or desertion, and if both parties are still unmarried, they should seek reconciliation.

Yes, this could sound harsh to us today. When we are in the midst of fights and conflicts, reconciliation is really the last thing in mind. But, please don't rule this out. We have seen couples that are on the verge of divorce, or have actually divorced one another. And as they listen to God's word, as the Holy Spirit softens their heart, with the help of counselors, they were able to resolve their problems and reconciled to each other. Please don't underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit when we yield our hearts to him.

2. Mixed marriages. What about the situation where one spouse is a believer and the other not? It is very likely that either the husband or the wife became a believer after marriage. Vs.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." If the unbelieving spouse wants to stay in the marriage, the marriage should continue on.

What is the reason? Vs.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." The Bible teaches that children born to a believing parent, are also a part of God's family, being sanctified. How about the unbelieving spouse? Very often we say that the believing partner usually ends up being influenced by the unbelieving one. However, we learn here that when a spouse is a believer, the other person is being brought into contact of God's grace. That God's spirit will work in the other person's life, bringing him/her to Christ. This is a comfort to know, isn't it? God will work in our unbelieving spouse' heart to draw him/her to Him.

There is another situation. What if the unbelieving spouse wants to leave the marriage? V.15, 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." If the unbelieving party wants to leave, let him/her

do so. There is no need to turn that into a big argument or fight. If he or she does leave, then the other party is no longer enslaved, meaning being bound to the marriage vow. Vs.16, “¹⁶Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife?” This is a little difficult to interpret. Many biblical scholars took this verse to mean that: if the unbeliever wants to leave, let him/her go. Don’t keep insisting that you will be able to change him/her.

Conclusion:

Sermons like this usually bring about many mixed emotional responses. We are creative in trying to circumvent biblical teachings. We may tell ourselves that this is 21st century and we can’t live by something that is outdated. Or my situations are different and God understands my actions.

Certainly, every situation is different. It is important that we be careful not to pass judgment on others. However, having said this, it is also important for us to remember what God teaches in the Bible. You see, God wants marriage to be permanent. He wants husbands and wives to hold onto each other and become ONE. In order to experience this oneness and permanency in marriage, he wants us to treat each other as equal, carrying out our sexual responsibility to our spouses. When we fail, he wants us to seek reconciliation.

While I was in China, I saw a news report of a new company. It is called: “復合公司 The Reconciliation Company” The owners saw the rampant divorce rate in their city, so they decided to start a business with the sole purpose of helping divorced couples to reconcile with each other. I don't think they are Christians, but they got it right. Marriage is meant to be permanent.

I understand we live in a very confusing world. We no longer know right from wrong. We follow our feelings, which are in turn, being influenced by the world. At times we feel confused and bewildered, at a loss of knowing what to do.

In such moments, may I encourage you to return to God and His word. Let his word be the final authority not only on matters of Faith, but also on how we live. Yes, very often God's principles are not pleasant to our ears, it may even be down right offensive, but they are nevertheless true.