

Marriage & Singleness: A Series in 1 Corinthians 7

“Till Death Do Us Part” (1 Corinthians 7:10-16; 39-40)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 5/26/2013

Introduction

- ❖ You’ve probably heard the statistics claiming that divorce rates among Christians are just as high as the national average, which hovers around 50%. That is definitely alarming, but the problem is past studies failed to distinguish between nominal and active Christians – that is, those who only call themselves Christians from those who not only take the name but have lives that reflect Christian priorities.

- ❖ More recent studies have factored in certain religious behaviors and attitudes of Christian couples – such as weekly church attendance, regular Bible reading, prayer privately and together, etc. – and couples who scored higher in these areas had significantly lower divorce rates than nominal Christians and the public in general. In other words, Christians who took their faith seriously were less likely to divorce.
 - ▶ According to one study, by a leading sociologist at the University of Connecticut, 60% of nominal Christians who never attend church have been divorced, but compare that to just 38% of those who are weekly attenders.¹

- ❖ Now I know what you’re thinking: 38% is nothing to brag home about. It’s still much higher than we would like or expect. Nearly 4 out of 10 serious Christians have been divorced? That’s still discouraging.
 - ▶ But the point is that faith and serious discipleship to Christ does make a difference. Those who call Jesus their Lord (and prove it with their lives) are more inclined to observe his commands. So when their Lord teaches against the practice of divorce and for the permanence of marriage, serious disciples listen and obey.

- ❖ Today as we consider the teaching of Jesus and his Apostle Paul, each of us are confronted with an existential question: *Am I a disciple of Jesus? And am I simply one by name or does my life reflect a serious discipleship to Christ?* **Here is a litmus test: If you’re married or hope to be, honestly ask yourself this: *Is divorce even an option that I would consider?*** Could I entertain the notion of renegotiating my marriage vows?
 - ▶ In our day and age, no one goes into a marriage wanting a divorce or expecting one, but it’s safe to say that many couples at least concede to the possibility. Why else would they sign a prenuptial agreement? No one wants their marriage to end in divorce, but it totally falls within the realm of possibility.

- ❖ In our day, divorce is not just a possibility, oftentimes it’s seen as the more attractive option. The preferable one. It’s for the better. The couple is better off calling it quits than bowing to social pressure to endure a marriage where neither feels happy nor fulfilled.
 - ▶ But for the serious Christian who wants to take God and God’s Word seriously, divorce is not an option we should even consider, much less prefer.

¹ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/09/25/factchecker-divorce-rate-among-christians/>

- ❖ I know divorce is a difficult issue to talk about among Christians because so many of us have been personally affected, as the statistics suggest. But in our series through 1 Corinthians 7, we're faced with a passage that directly addresses the subject so we have to take it seriously.
 - ▶ Now Paul was addressing a specific situation brewing in the first-century Corinthian church, so he wasn't writing a treatise on divorce. He won't cover all the nuances and answer all your questions. But we can identify principles for marriage and divorce that transcend the Corinthian context and apply to us today.
 - I've divided our passage into three sections. We'll consider 1) Paul's instruction for Christian marriages, 2) His instructions for Christians in mixed marriages, and 3) Implications for the Church.

Instruction for Christian Marriages

- ❖ Let's begin with Paul's instruction for Christian marriages when it comes to the practice of divorce. There are two points to make in vv10-11. The first is straightforward. Don't do it. **1) Don't let divorce be an option that you and your spouse would even consider.**
 - ▶ Let's read it, ¹⁰*To 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.*"
- ❖ Now it's important for us to understand the context behind our text. Previously we saw in vv1-6 that Paul was responding to certain issues the Corinthians had raised in another letter. They were espousing views contrary to what Paul originally taught, so he writes to correct.
 - ▶ In this case, some in the church had turned sexual abstinence into an ascetic ideal. They thought it made you more spiritual. This resulted in some married Christians abstaining from sex, and some were even contemplating divorce in order to better avoid it, which leads Paul to write vv10-11. Notice he addresses wives first – not his normal practice – suggesting that wives were likely the ones initiating.
- ❖ Now in Jewish culture, that would've been impossible since only husbands could initiate a divorce. But the Corinthian church was mostly Gentile, and the Greco-Roman attitude towards marriage and divorce was, in many ways, more lenient than what's seen today.
 - ▶ For example, Roman marriage laws did not require a legal or formal ceremony to validate a marriage. All that was needed was the intention of both partners to form an exclusive union. And that made divorce just as easy and informal. Marriage ended when the consent to be married was renounced by one or both partners.
 - And simply leaving the home was enough to constitute divorce. You didn't have to file papers or obtain a legal status change. So if you think divorce is too accessible and lenient in our day, imagine what it was like in Paul's.
- ❖ Our culture has a highly libertarian attitude towards issues like marriage and divorce. And people hate it when Christians make moral judgments about choices they make affecting their personal relationships. I won't lie, it makes me apprehensive to preach on divorce.

- ▶ But I imagine Paul faced a situation just as tough or more so. Yet rather than softening his tone or evading the issue, he addresses it head on and actually shifts his tone from “I wish” (v7) to “I charge/command”. In earlier verses, he was just expressing his preference, but here in v10, *this* is a command.

- ❖ And the command is: “*the wife should not separate from her husband . . . and the husband should not divorce his wife.*” Those terms *separate* and *divorce* are synonymous (cf. 7:13). They both refer to the dissolution of a marriage. Perhaps the reason why Paul used ‘separate’ for a wife is because, in that culture, she would divorce by leaving her husband’s household. She would *separate* herself. It was never the husband who left the home. He would *send away* the wife, which is literally what the word ‘divorce’ means in the Greek.

- ❖ Now what did Paul mean with that parenthetical statement, “*(not I, but the Lord)*”? Later in v12 he says, “*(I, not the Lord)*”. Was he distinguishing between a more authoritative command versus a less authoritative one? No, in v10 he simply means that the command he is giving did not originate from him but from the Lord Jesus himself.

- ❖ In Mark 10, Pharisees questioned Jesus on the legality of divorce, and he replied by emphasizing God’s intent from the beginning for marriage to be a permanent one-flesh union between a husband and his wife. They’re no longer two separate individuals but one flesh, a new creation. “*What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.*” (10:9)
 - ▶ That word Jesus used for ‘separate’ is the same Paul uses in v10, so he probably had in mind that particular command of Jesus. The Lord made it clear that divorce was not an option to consider, especially for those who affirmed the inspiration of Scripture (Genesis 2 in particular) and pledged allegiance to the God of Scripture.

- ❖ Now our culture is going to reject this. Many will say that divorce is a necessary option. No couple goes into marriage with plans to divorce, but the fact is people change. You’re not the same person you were when you first got married and neither is your spouse. And if the two of you have grown apart, then it does no one any good to pretend that it’s working. To be stuck in an unfulfilling, unhappy marriage is a horrible way to live.
 - ▶ So you hear statements like, “*We weren’t really being ourselves. We felt trapped. To find ourselves we needed to separate ourselves.*” Nowadays many couples see divorce as their means of becoming a better person.

- ❖ That’s what the Corinthians wanted – to become a better Christian. They felt restricted by their conjugal duties, and divorce was their path to a more truthful self-expression as a spiritually-fulfilled celibate
 - ▶ In one sense, this make total sense. If the ‘self’ is elevated to the position of utmost importance, then the view of marriage as a lifelong covenant is easily supplanted by a radically individualistic view where marriage is a contract of unspecified duration contingent upon customer satisfaction. We enter marriage as consumers seeking what we can get out of it. If dissatisfied, we can return it or trade in for another.

- ❖ Of course, this is radically different compared to biblical marriage – which is not about ‘me’, not even just about ‘we’, but ultimately about “He” who joined us together in a one-flesh union. And if God made the union then only God can end it and only on his terms.
 - ▶ Remember our Lord's words, “*What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.*” So if the man and woman had joined *themselves* together – if marriage was just a contractual agreement between two persons – they would have the prerogative to void the contract at will. But if God is the central figure in marriage who joins the couple *himself*, then a husband and his wife do not have the luxury of divorcing at will. They must abide by God’s Word and his will.

- ❖ This is why, in Christian marriages, divorce should not be a notion we even entertain. It should not even cross our minds. As disciples of Jesus, husband and wife are called to peace and to be peacemakers (Mt. 5:9). And that means **2) Marital reconciliation is to be pursued always, in every instance.**
 - ▶ Notice that second parenthetical statement Paul makes starting in v11, “*(but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband)*” Here he envisions the possibility of a wife disobeying the Lord’s command.
 - His point is that – even though in the eyes of the state she is now divorced (the marriage is dissolved) – in the eyes of God she is still one-flesh with her husband. To remarry another man would be to commit adultery.

- ❖ Now it appears as if Paul were laying out two equally valid options: She can either remain unmarried (in a state of disobedience) *or else* be reconciled to her husband. If this is the case, then reconciliation is just one of two choices. But that doesn't seem likely. I can't imagine Paul would permit a believer to remain in a state of perpetual disobedience when marital reconciliation is a possibility.
 - ▶ Besides, he was arguing earlier that married couples should not forgo their vows. They should stay married and act married, and later he'll argue that each should remain in the condition in which he was called by God (7:20). In this case: married.
 - I think reconciliation is still Paul's goal, and he only mentions remaining unmarried because a second marriage would rule out any chance of reconciliation, which is actually spelled out in the Law (Deut. 24:4). If there is to ever be reconciliation, she has to remain unmarried.

- ❖ Reconciliation is still the only recourse and the only counsel we can biblically offer to those with marital problems. But when dealing with its members, it is the church's responsibility, in situations where physical or emotional abuse is present, to immediately protect victimized spouses (and children) by removing them from a dangerous home environment.
 - ▶ But divorce is still not an option we could ever recommend for two believers. Not only because the Bible says so but because we have great faith in the grace and power of God. If both the husband and wife have received God's grace, if they're indwelt by his Spirit, then you can never rule out reconciliation. With man it is impossible, but with God nothing is impossible.

Instruction for Christians in Mixed Marriages

- ❖ So in vv10-11, that was Paul's instructions for Christian marriages, but next, he turns his attention to mixed marriages between a Christian and a non-Christian. Jesus, in his earthly ministry never faced this particular scenario. Among his Jewish audience, married couples shared a common belief in Yahweh God and in God's intent for marriage.
 - ▶ But these Corinthians were converted out of paganism not long ago, and some had spouses who remained unbelievers. This created a new set of tensions. Based on Paul's reply in v14, it's likely these Christians were afraid their one-flesh union with their unbelieving spouse was somehow defiling them.

- ❖ So to these believers, Paul writes vv12-13. *"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. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him."*
 - ▶ Now when you read, *"(I say, not the Lord)"*, it doesn't mean Paul is only giving his opinion. He is giving an apostolic command. Just not one based on a saying of Jesus. He is unaware of Jesus ever addressing divorce in regards to mixed-faith marriages.

- ❖ The command is similar to the earlier one. **The instruction is simple: 1) Do not push for a divorce ever.** If it were up to you, you stay married. Yet continuation of the marriage, in this situation, really depends on the unbeliever's willingness to continue.

- ❖ When a pagan husband witnesses a dramatic conversion in the life of his wife, he's confronted by difficult realities. She now worships another god, one who tells her to reject their household gods. She submits to an authority higher than him. She continually speaks of her love for another man, a man she calls The Great Bridegroom, her Lord, her King.
 - ▶ Her priorities have all changed. Nowadays she seeks first his kingdom and his righteousness, and she is no longer anxious or greatly concerned about what we will eat or drink or wear (Mt. 6:31-33). This pagan husband faces a tough choice. This isn't the woman he married. It's like she's a new person/creation (2 Cor. 5:17). But if he chooses to accept her and to stay in the marriage, then the believing wife should not even entertain the thought of divorce.

- ❖ Friends, this is not a unique dilemma for first-century couples. The fact is many today are in the same situation. Mixed marriages consisting of a believing wife and unbelieving husband are quite common in Christian congregations. In fewer cases, the roles are reversed.
 - ▶ If you're a Christian with an unbelieving spouse, listen as Paul offers you two motivations to stay in your marriage and to pursue reconciliation if needed. **You need to understand that a) Your marital union "sanctifies" your unbelieving spouse, and b) Your marital peace paves the way for evangelistic possibilities.**

- ❖ The two are closely related. Let's read v14, "*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.*"
 - ▶ And now let's skip to the end of v15, "*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?*"

- ❖ Now it's safe to say Paul *does not* mean in v14 that the believer will make their unbelieving spouse a Christian. It's clearly not what he implies since, in v16, the spouse still needs to be saved. And he doesn't mean holiness of character will rub off from one spouse to another.
 - ▶ The words "make holy" literally mean to "set apart". So more likely Paul meant that the unbelieving spouse is "set apart" from the world by being in a marriage where he or she is able to receive a Christian influence and witness.

- ❖ If you want your unbelieving husband or wife to become a Christian, then remaining in a one-flesh union with a child of God is the best scenario for them. They'll have the greatest opportunity for the gospel to be proclaimed to them on a daily basis by your words and conduct. Paul also says that any children you bear will also fall under your gospel influence.
 - ▶ I realize that it often appears that the non-Christian spouse tends to have the greater influence and affect over the spiritual direction of a marriage. But this passage demonstrates that this need not be the case.
 - This is an encouragement and a charge for the Christian spouse to pursue godliness in their own lives because it has a powerful affect. As John Calvin put it, "*The godliness of the one does more to "sanctify" the marriage than the ungodliness of the other to make it unclean.*"

- ❖ Now at the end of v15, Paul reminds them that they were called to peace. He's trying to deter these Christians from causing unnecessary strife in the lives and in their relationships by divorcing on religious grounds. They were called to peace and if the unbeliever consents to stay, then don't upset the peace (the harmony) of the marriage by pushing for divorce.
 - ▶ Paul goes on to say in v16, "*For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband?*" And vice versa. Now the first time I read it, I assumed the implied answer was "No" and that the question related to the situation Paul raises in v15 where the unbeliever has deserted the marriage. I thought Paul was saying to the Christian to let go since there was no guarantee you could've saved him/her anyways.

- ❖ But after studying it more, I think the "*how do you know*" question was spoken by Paul in optimism. It makes sense to see Paul, here in v16, giving positive motivation for maintaining the marriage as long as the unbeliever consents to remain. The NRSV translates v16, "*Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.*" Bottom line, don't abandon the marriage for there is always the possibility you'll win your spouse for Christ.

- ❖ Before we continue, let me speak a brief word to any single person who gets the idea that marrying a non-Christian is potentially a good thing. *“By marrying I can set them apart and lead them to Christ!”* That’s a great justification for dating or marrying a non-believer, but let me put on the brakes and point to you Paul’s words in v39. Here he addresses widows in the church, *“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.”*
 - ▶ So if a widow is to remarry she is free to marry whom she wishes but he must be in the Lord – that is, he must be a fellow believer. That principle would apply to the unmarried in general, including those who are single and have never married. Besides vv12-16 are specifically addressed those who were already married prior to their conversion. Again Paul’s point is that they should not push for a divorce (ever).

- ❖ But now let’s consider v15 and what is commonly called the Pauline exception when it comes to divorce. Jesus taught his disciples that all divorce is illegitimate and invalid before God, but he also gave an exception on the grounds of sexual immorality (Mt. 5:32).
 - ▶ Here the Apostle offers another. Christians should never push for divorce, **2) But if your unbelieving spouse pushes and persists, then let it be.** *“But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved.”*

- ❖ So in this scenario, the unbeliever initiates the separation. Our earlier principle of always pursuing marital reconciliation remains, but if the unbelieving spouse refuses and moves on, then the brother or sister who has been deserted is not longer enslaved or under bondage.
 - ▶ This a notoriously difficult verse to interpret, especially Paul’s intent behind the words “not enslaved”. There a number of options that either permit divorce and remarriage, or just divorce but not remarriage, or neither. But the majority view among evangelicals today is to see the abandoned believer as no longer bound by his/her marriage.² The divorce is real to God and the prospect of remarriage is available.

- ❖ But again, we have to stress that marital reconciliation should always be our default. If there is an exception clause, it should never be treated as a license to divorce, as a “Get Out of Jail Free” card. The deserted party’s first recourse (and our initial counsel) should never be to take the divorce and move on.
 - ▶ The restoration and preservation of the marriage should always be our goal and fervent prayer. But we ultimately have no control over the response of the unbelieving partner. And especially if that partner goes on to remarry, then the opportunity for reconciliation is certainly gone. *In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved.*

Implications for the Church

- ❖ Let me conclude by drawing out implications for the Church in light of what we’ve seen. First, the Church’s duty in these cases is always to **1) Protect the weak and victimized.**

² See Andreas Kostenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 254-6.

- ❖ As we've already said, if we're dealing with a situation where physical or emotional abuse is present, our immediate recourse is to remove victims from danger. While still maintaining reconciliation as its greatest priority, the Church has a unique responsibility and privilege to shield the weak.
 - ▶ Ask yourself: *As a member of this church, if I'm aware of such a situation in our community, am I willing to open my home as a safe house for a battered wife or kids, to meet their basic needs, or to even offer counsel and support for the couple?* Perhaps if we loved one other in such a way, then less couples would feel like divorce was their only recourse.

- ❖ Second, the Church needs to **2) Paint a realistic picture of marriage in the present age.** We need to remind our people that we live in an age of the already but not yet. Redemption in Christ is already here but it is not yet realized in its entirety.
 - ▶ If we get that, then we can accept a realistic picture of marriage that factors in the pervasiveness of sin in our lives. Often couples have this vision of a "perfect marriage" where you never fight, you're never bored, you never feel discontent or unfulfilled. And the minute they experience any of that (to any degree), they panic and hit the eject button.

- ❖ But every Christian ought to know that every marriage, especially their own, is tainted by sin and awaits full redemption. There should be no foolish expectation of perfection. Just the realistic (biblical) expectation of selfishness and sin.
 - ▶ I like to tell couples that one of the blessings of marriage is how God uses it to shape the two of you into the image of Christ. Marriage will function like a mirror revealing the sin to which you were blinded, the sin you still need to put to death.
 - So I tell them not to be shocked or despondent to when they encounter sin and problems in their marriage, but to "*count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds.*" (Jas. 1:2) God is using your marriage, with all its imperfections, for your perfection in Christ.

- ❖ And lastly, the Church needs to **3) Provide a gospel-motive for persevering in marriage.** It's not enough to just say don't divorce or tell people to stick it out. People need a grand vision for marriage that inspires them to persevere for the long haul, till death do us part. Without a vision we're ill-equipped to resist the sinful tendency in us all to make divorce an easy solution to marital problems.
 - ▶ And that grand vision for marriage is none other that its ability to reflect the union between Christ and his Bride (the Church). As husband and wife maintain their marital bond in all faithfulness, they provide a sign of God's faithful, enduring, persevering love for his people.
 - May you get married and stay married to make that a reality in your life.