

COMMITMENT IN MARRIAGE

SERIES: LIFESTYLE ISSUES IN THE CHURCH

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In 1 Corinthians 7:10-24 the apostle Paul confronts a provocative issue in the life of the church and a major social problem in our world today: the growing challenge to commitment in marriage that is represented by divorce. In the United States, approximately every other marriage ends in divorce. In California the rate is even higher; there are nearly as many divorces each year as marriages. Love is praised and espoused everywhere you look in the media, and yet it's sadly lacking in terms of committed marriages. Unhappy marriages are much too common, even in Christian circles.

That was illustrated to me last week by a tragic account that a man who goes to this church shared with me. Recently, his brother-in-law, who supposedly had been a Christian at some point in his life, died of a stroke as a relatively young man. He spent the last few days of his life in a coma at a hospital in Reno. He was surrounded during those last days by five women: His mother, his ex-wife, their daughter, his then-current wife, and the woman he was having an affair with when he was taken ill. How tragic for each one of those five people, the tangled web that was woven out of frustration, unhappiness, and lack of fulfillment in marriage.

Difficult marriage relationships and the problematic solution of divorce are not unique to the twentieth century. We are repeating the conditions that existed in the Roman Empire in New-Testament times. In the great cosmopolitan cities like Corinth, divorce was very common. It was simple to obtain for both men and women, just as it is today.

This entire seventh chapter of 1 Corinthians focuses on problems relating to marriage, singleness, and sexuality. In verses 10-24 Paul emphasizes the pressures behind the breakup of marriage. He is thoroughly familiar with the acceptance of divorce by the Greco-Roman world, and he understands the temptations this creates for Christian husbands and wives to take what looks like the easy way out of a difficult marriage relationship.

These verses speak to couples today who are unhappy and frustrated in their marriage relationships, who don't think they can live with the conflict and difficulty anymore. I would appeal to you, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ and you see little chance for the survival of your marriage, to ask God, as you interact with the word, to "enlighten the eyes of your heart," in Paul's words. And if you feel that you made a bad choice in getting married, then please listen to God's word with special attention. And if you somehow think that you could serve the Lord more effectively without the bondage of marriage, then ask the Lord to teach you through this inspired text what true freedom is. And if you feel hopeless about your marriage, then hear this divine word of hope, because that is what it is: hope in hopelessness.

This text is divided into two sections. Verses 10-16 are a call to faithfulness and commitment in marriage. Paul first addresses Christian couples, then Christian believers who are married to unbelievers. The second section, verses 17-24, presents a universal spiritual principle behind Paul's challenge, the secret to remaining faithful in a difficult relationship.

CHRISTIANS COUPLES ARE TO STAY MARRIED

Verses 10-11 give us guidelines for Christian married couples:

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away.

To Christian husbands and wives, Paul says, "If you're married, stay married." There is no distinction made here as to the type of marriage involved, whether it was Jewish or Roman, formal or common-law, civil or religious. These new converts in the church in Corinth would have marriages representing every kind of arrangement practiced in that day, every type of marriage that we can imagine. It's clear that Paul is addressing his instructions to marriages in which both partners are Christians in these two verses, because Paul never gave apostolic commands to non-Christians. Unbelievers don't have the internal spiritual resources to obey the commands that God lays down in his word. Also, beginning in verse 12, Paul is going to deal specifically with marriages in which only one partner is a believer.

So that there is no doubt as to the source of this call to commitment in marriage, the apostle adds the phrase, "Not I, but the Lord." In Matthew 19:4-9 Jesus has already taught this truth during his earthly ministry. In verse 5 Jesus quoted the creation orders of marriage from Genesis 2:24: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh." Then in verse 6 Jesus made some inferences for us: "Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." In answer to a specific question that the Pharisees had posed to him, he went on to explain that God directed Moses to permit divorce only because of his people's hardness of heart, or sinful stubbornness. Divorce was established to guard innocent people who were being taken advantage of in the rush to put spouses, usually women, away. Jesus added that divorce was allowed-not commanded-only in the case of adultery. Verse 9: "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

Speaking through the Old-Testament prophet Malachi, God thundered, "...I hate divorce..." (2:16). Divorce is contrary to his plan for us. It violates his good gift, which we talked about in the last message ([Discovery Paper 4521](#)). It's a rejection of his grace. But God hates divorce mostly because he loves people and he loves relationships. He knows how foolish the idea of no-fault divorce is. Divorce is always violent and wrenching, and God hates to see people victimized by that. Jesus makes clear that when divorce is allowed in cases of adultery, it's only as a gracious concession to the innocent party in an irreconcilable case of unfaithfulness. When the sinning spouse repents before the Lord and before their husband or wife and comes back, God can bring healing and reconciliation.

We don't know why some of the Corinthian believers wanted to divorce their Christian marriage partners. In light of 1 Corinthians 7:1-9, they may have been moved by the super-spiritual, ascetic group in the church who said that the best way to live was not to have any kind of sexual interaction whatsoever. "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" was their slogan. Perhaps they thought that if they could get out of a bad marriage to a Christian spouse, they could stay celibate and somehow glorify God to a greater degree. But Paul strongly refutes that ascetism and says that's not how we were created as men and women in God's image. And most of us today wouldn't identify with that perspective. But we might identify with some in Corinth who wanted to leave their mates because they felt unfulfilled in their marriages. Or perhaps they developed infatuations with others in the church in new relationships that they wanted to justify as being more spiritually fulfilling or satisfying.

Whatever the reasons, they were not to divorce. Again, verse 10: "...The wife should not leave her husband." And verse 11: "...The husband should not send his wife away." The terms "leave" and "send away" are interchangeable in the original Greek for divorcing a husband or a wife. Paul is not discussing here the concession that Jesus made for adultery. He is only talking about divorce for other reasons, even supposedly spiritual ones.

"...But if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband..." This suggests that some of the believers in Corinth have already divorced, or are moving in that direction. Paul says that if that happens, then they must not remarry. They've got to wait for the other one to want to come back, holding out the hope that God can reconcile the relationship, because in God's eyes the union has never been broken. God's expectation of this kind of physical separation is always hopeful. You see, God is not a "cosmic

killjoy." He desires the door to always be open for possible reconciliation between the estranged partners.

The language is very strong here. These are not suggestions from a marriage counselor. These are divine commands from our Lord Jesus, reinforced by Paul's apostolic authority. His instruction to Christian married couples is to face into the difficulties and work out the differences. There are three imperatives of faithful commitment that are very strong in those two verses: "Do not leave," "Be reconciled," and "Do not send her away." The apostle is not the least bit sympathetic toward irreconcilable differences between Christians.

There was a couple sitting in the front row here earlier this morning. Twenty years ago, one of the first weddings I was involved in at PBC was to remarry them. They had been divorced. Alcohol and infidelity were involved. Yet the other spouse waited and prayed and left the door open. The Lord brought me into the situation when they were seeking reconciliation, and I had the joy of remarrying them before their families, their grown children, and their grandchildren. Twenty years later, they're still ministering and serving here. God has honored that choice to be reconciled. I talked to the husband this morning, and he said, "You know what? We're stronger than ever." God is true to his word. He is the God of reconciliation and hope.

A CHRISTIAN'S MINISTRY TO THEIR UNBELIEVING SPOUSE

Now in verses 12-16 Paul is going to tackle the issue of newly converted Christians in the church in Corinth who are married to people who didn't respond to the gospel when it was preached. (He is not talking here about Christians who choose to marry non-Christians. Paul is very clear that a believer is not to marry an unbeliever. In 2 Corinthians 6:14 Paul says, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers...") Let's look at verses 12-14:

But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

This was written in response to honest questions raised by some of these new believers. Were they free to divorce someone with whom they were unequally yoked, and then perhaps remain single to serve the Lord, or to remarry a Christian they had met? Paul had taught them in Corinth what he wrote to them in chapter 6, that their bodies were members of Christ, and they were sanctuaries of the Holy Spirit. So there would be understandable concern about whether or not to maintain marital union with an unbelieving spouse. Some may have thought that such a union joined Christ to Satan, or that it was defiling to the believer or to their children. Were they dishonoring God with their bodies by staying married to an unbeliever? Perhaps some of these new Christians were intoxicated with the wonderful new community of faith, and became attracted to new brothers and sisters in Christ. Understandably, they would strongly desire to have a Christian marriage partner.

Jesus didn't talk directly about this problem in the gospels. So the statement that Paul makes there at the beginning of verse 12, "...I say, not the Lord..." is not denying apostolic inspiration or suggesting that he is only giving his human opinion. It's just saying that God hasn't given previous revelation on this specific subject, and now Paul is doing just that, as an apostle of the Lord. And Paul is very clear in verses 12-13 that a Christian husband or wife who is married to an unbeliever must not initiate a divorce if the unbeliever is content to stay married.

The Christian doesn't have to worry about whether they or their children are going to somehow be defiled by the unbelieving spouse. As a matter of fact, verse 14 says that just the opposite is true. The Christian can bless them and having a life-changing effect on them.

Now, let's be realistic. I know that being unequally yoked in a one-flesh relationship as a Christian with a non-Christian can be difficult. It's complicated, discouraging, and frustrating for both parties. Some new believers have driven their spouses nuts with their impatient zeal. Understandably, there can be a backlash to that. Sometimes the unbelieving spouse treats the Christian unfairly and ungraciously, even persecuting them

for their faith.

But the good news Paul is proclaiming here is that the Christian spouse will not be spiritually defiled or polluted by staying in the marriage. The promise in verse 14 is that there is a wonderful new spiritual dynamic at work in the relationship. The Christian's presence in that marriage can be wonderfully life-changing. The non-Christian spouse is going to talk, eat, work, play, and make love with someone who is indwelt by the living Christ. The Christian spouse is, in Paul's words, "...a fragrance of Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:15) in their nostrils every day.

If you as a Christian are in such a marriage, Paul is encouraging you not to underestimate the spiritual blessing you can bring to your unsaved spouse. Your spouse is going to have to put up with all the tender, loving care you can give them in the Lord Jesus Christ! Your loving witness can be very difficult for them to resist, and may very well lead them into relationship with Christ. The apostle Peter held out that hope for Christian wives in the churches in Turkey that he wrote to:

"You [Christian] wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won [to faith in Christ] without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior." (1 Peter 3:1-2.)

The other good news is that your children are folded into the promise as well. You don't have to fear some kind of defiling influence from your non-Christian spouse on your children. God graciously offers the hope that since one of their parents is a Christian, they will be protected from undue spiritual harm. Your spiritual presence and witness will speak in clear contrast to their unbelieving parent's life. And that could lead the children to salvation.

This brought to mind a number of histories of spiritual influence that folks among us have had in their families. I've also heard stories of the influence that just one other family member had on folks who are now followers of Jesus Christ among us. That's all it takes—a majority of one person who stands for Jesus Christ. It might have been a grandparent, a spouse, a sibling, or a favorite aunt or uncle who loved Jesus. Because of their faithfulness in the family, others received the spiritual blessings of God and eternal life. I know of men and women in our body who are married to unbelievers and who are faithfully serving those folks. They are a tremendous witness and example. My wife told me of one of the dear women in our church who said that her unbelieving husband has become her best friend. That isn't a statement about him. That's the evidence of Christ at work in her, because God has changed her on the inside.

PEACE IF THE UNBELIEVING SPOUSE LEAVES

Now, what do you do if the non-Christian spouse wants to leave the marriage? That's addressed in verses 15-16:

Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the 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? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

When the unbelieving spouse wants to leave the marriage, the believer often has no control over the outcome. And Paul says that the Christian spouse should not insist on the other spouse's staying if he or she is determined to leave the marriage. Listen to how *The Message* paraphrases verse 15:

"On the other hand, if the unbelieving spouse walks out, you've got to let him or her go. You don't have to hold on desperately. God has called us to make the best of it, as peacefully as we can." (1)

Paul says that if the non-Christian divorces the believer, the marriage bond is broken. That's what "not under bondage" means. In the Scriptures, this abandonment by an unbelieving spouse is one of only three harsh

realities that dissolves a marriage. The other two are death and adultery. Paul will address the issue of death in verse 39: "A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." And we heard the words of the Lord Jesus about how adultery destroys the marriage bond. And throughout the Scriptures, whenever a divorce is allowed legitimately, then remarriage is assumed.

In the last phrase of verse 15, Paul suggests another reason why God allows divorce in the case of desertion. He says that God has called us to peace. If the unbelieving spouse can't tolerate the Christian faith, and if they really want to get out of the union, it's better that the marriage be dissolved so that peace can be preserved. Fighting, turmoil, bickering, criticism, and frustration disrupt the harmony and peace that God wants for his children. The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (12:18.) But if an unbeliever wants out of the marriage, then peace no longer depends on the Christian.

The Christian spouse has no assurance, anyway, that continuing the marriage will save the non-Christian. Regardless of their motives and hopes, the likelihood of leading a partner to Christ is minimal if the partner is forced to stay in the marriage unwillingly or reluctantly. Paul's bottom line here is that we can't force people into regeneration. And the call to peace in the dissolution of a marriage is important for the Christian spouse. They must be Christ-like through the process of dissolution, as painful and difficult as it might be. There is no place for revenge, spite, or recrimination. They must ask the Lord to make them a peacemaker.

God takes a very high view of marriage in this section. He wants us to stay committed to our marriage relationships as believers, even if we are married to an unbeliever, because God himself is so committed to marriage. Hebrews 13:4 says that God has declared marriage honorable. *The Amplified New Testament* (2) defines that as esteemed, worthy, precious, of great price, especially dear. We should never underestimate what God desires to do in our marriages. No matter how difficult the relationship, the good news is that God can be honored and glorified.

"BLOOMING WHERE YOU'RE PLANTED"

In the last section, verses 17-24, Paul explains the general principle on which he has built his argument in verses 10-16. He generalizes far beyond the specific issue of remaining faithful in marriage. He illustrates the principle with a couple of other relationships: that of Jew to Gentile, with the big, divisive issue of circumcision, and that of free men to slaves, who were trying to be unified and live together in the body of Christ. Paul makes the point three different times in verses 17, 20, and 24 what God's perspective is on how we should respond to difficult circumstances. Let's read each of the principles first:

Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. ...Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called...Brethren, let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

We could paraphrase these verses like this: "Do not be in a hurry to change the external circumstances of your life simply because you have become a Christian." We've seen the difficulties that these Corinthians were having with their marriages. Some of them believed that if they changed their marital status, they would be happier, more fulfilled, perhaps even more spiritual. The phrase in verse 17, "Let him walk," has the same meaning as the phrase in the New International Version (NIV), "Retain the place of life." It means the circumstances that you are in, the external setting—our marital status, physical setting, or socioeconomic status. These three verses imply that whatever state we were in when we came to salvation in Jesus Christ, we should seek to function faithfully there without trying to change it.

All three of those verses talk about the call that we heard in Christ Jesus to salvation, to new life. That call in Jesus Christ transcends all physical circumstances. It makes them irrelevant. Being a new creature in Christ has so radically changed our relationship with God that we don't need to try to change the relationships around us. The life of Christ is so transforming, both to us and to all the people that we interact with, that whatever frustration or friction there is in the difficult relationships, God by his Spirit in us can ease and soften.

The challenge is to find contentment in Christ, whatever the difficult relationship. The apostle Paul wrote to

Timothy, who was struggling as a pastor in a difficult church in Ephesus: "...Godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment" (1 Timothy 6:6). It's hard to be contented in difficult circumstances, isn't it? And yet the call of the apostle is, in a sense, to bloom where we are planted. God knows what he is doing in the planting. We don't like to remain, do we? All of us envision how it could be better in some other setting, some other place, or some other marriage relationship. But the call in all three verses is to stay where you are and see what God will do in the circumstances.

WHAT MATTERS IS OBEDIENCE

Paul illustrates the principle twice, and in each case the relationship is much more extreme, in terms of loss and limitation and frustration, than marriage is. The first setting has to do with circumcision. In verses 18-19, Paul says that our identity in Christ transcends the difficulties of racial and religious conflicts.

Was any man called already circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.

This was an explosive issue in the church of Christ. There was a great barrier to unity between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. There were Judaizers trying to force Gentile Christian men to be circumcised, and there were many Jewish men who sought acceptance in the Greco-Roman world with a minor surgical procedure that made them look like they had never been circumcised. Circumcision was one of the most fundamental requirements of Judaism, but Paul says it's a matter of moral indifference for followers of Jesus Christ. And it's practically wrong to change the external sign, because it unnecessarily separates believers from their families and friends, and makes witnessing to them that much more difficult. What matters is obedience to the Lord, the apostle says. That's the only mark of faithfulness that God recognizes. Obedience is costly and difficult, but it is possible by the power of the Spirit. We can be obedient anywhere and in any circumstances. It's really an internal issue, not an external issue.

TRUE FREEDOM AND TRUE SLAVERY

The second illustration is that of slavery in the Roman Empire. We see in verses 21-23 that our identity in Christ transcends the difficulties of socioeconomic conflicts.

Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.

Paul says it's fine if you're offered a chance for emancipation-go for it! But it won't make any difference ultimately in terms of relationships. You belong to the Lord Jesus whether you're free or in bondage. And it's that ultimate relationship that's defining, not the human relationships.

This was also a tremendously divisive issue in the Christian church. There were poor slaves who had no resources and no claim to their own lives, and there were wealthy free men in the church. They were called to oneness, but this tremendous gulf was difficult to bridge. Again, what Paul says is that neither slavery nor freedom affects our identity in Christ. Neither state makes serving the Lord in relationships inherently easier than the other. In reality, in the spiritual sense, the literal slaves are free in Christ, and the literal free men are slaves to Christ.

Now, let's think about a situation or relationship in which we feel in bondage or enslaved. If we focus on our spiritual freedom, and then on our slavery in God, then our freedom or slavery among people is much less important. We need to look at it from the right perspective, in the right attitude. Then it doesn't matter if we're bound in some sense or free in a human relationship. It's a wonderful, mysterious paradox in the gospel of Jesus Christ that we are all, men and women, free, but we are slaves to Jesus Christ.

We've heard a call to commitment and faithfulness in relationships all through this passage. What this is really about is finding the key to making our present difficult circumstance count for the Lord, being God's man or woman, allowing his kingdom to come in our life. The issue is counting on God to change us. He is the one who gives us joy, not the human relationships or the circumstances. He is the one who delivers us. God is sovereignly at work, changing things for his honor and glory. Our circumstances are not an accident or a bad break.

And as we have seen, no matter how wide the gulf between Jew and Gentile, between slave and free, God can bridge it and bring unity and harmony. And he wants to do the same thing in our difficult marriage relationships, whether our spouse is a believer or an unbeliever. The distance can seem impossible to bridge. But God in his faithfulness is able to enter into the conflict and frustration and resentment, and fill us with joy and peace in the midst of the struggle.

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

Paul has talked about this issue of God's faithfulness from the very beginning of this letter. First Corinthians 1:9: "God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." His faithfulness was at work when he first got our attention and offered us salvation. That was a miracle. This verse tells us that he is also present; we have intimate fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. He is in the middle of our difficult marriage relationship. Proverbs 18:24 says he is "a friend who sticks closer than a brother." He understands the difficulties. The issue for us is learning to trust his presence and his promises.

Listen to the great words of Jeremiah the prophet to the people of Israel in the middle of the Babylonian captivity, written when they had no opportunity to change their circumstances. They were in bondage and slavery. God says, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV.) When it seems hopeless, God speaks hope. About seventy years earlier, Jeremiah had watched his nation literally die around him. He had watched the siege of Jerusalem, and it was a horrible scene of starvation and cannibalism. He had watched the city fall to the Babylonian armies and had seen all the atrocities of war. The book of the Lamentations expresses his almost unbearable grief and mourning over the carnage. And yet, in the middle of that book, he writes these words (3:21-23):

**"This I recall to my mind,
Therefore I have hope.
The LORD'S lovingkindness indeed never cease;
For His compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
Great is Thy faithfulness."**

God promises that every morning in the difficult relationship he will be faithful to us, one day at a time. We can remain faithfully committed to our marriages no matter how difficult they are, because we can count on God's faithfulness. He will give us his loyal love, his compassion, his merciful heart toward our spouse, who is so desperately in need of the love, mercy, and grace of God.

NOTES

1. Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, © 1993, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 347.
2. *The Amplified New Testament*, © 1995, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 590.

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