

Text: 1 Corinthians 7:8-16, Part 2

Title: Instructions to people in various marital situations

Truth: Marriage is a high Christian calling and maintaining it holy honors God.

Date/Location: Sunday June 28, 2020 at FBC

Introduction

The apostle is addressing Christians about marriage. These things should be well known, understood, and practiced by all Christians throughout the world at all times. Even so, the person who is *not* a follower of Christ (yet) would do well to read this section carefully and follow its teaching as well, because God’s ways are healthy and for our good as well as because of His holiness.

But Paul does not realistically expect unbelievers to desire to do so, because they are in some measure in the dark about the ways of God. They would not more fully understand God’s mind on the matter until and unless they come to faith in Christ. Therefore, we do not expect that unbelievers will care to be constrained by Biblical teaching on marriage and divorce—they will do what they want. Even if the Bible says they should not be remarried, or they should be faithful, or whatever—they will do just about whatever they please. This is why he does not address the category of marriages where both spouses are not followers of Christ.

We can try to encourage good marriage practices in the society at large, and any societal pressure that can be brought to bear on us to “do the right thing” is a good thing. But “external measures” are of no ultimate power without the Spirit of Christ indwelling a person.

Back to the text itself...Paul has addressed unmarried people and widows, and married Christian people. But now he addresses a different case:

III. Unequally Yoked Marriages, v. 12-16

This category concerns those who are in a marriage with a believing spouse and one unbelieving spouse. The apostle is addressing the Christian believer in the marriage.

A. “I, not the Lord.” As for the rest of the instruction in the chapter, the Lord Jesus did not specifically address these subjects in his recorded teachings in the gospels (as he did for verses 10-11). Therefore, in his apostolic office, *Paul* addresses them with the exact same authority as Christ would have if He were speaking instead of Paul. In fact, it is not that Paul is speaking instead of Christ; Christ is speaking through Paul!

This wording *does not mean* that Paul is speaking with some lesser authority than Jesus. His words are the very words of God, because God superintended what he wrote to be exactly what God intended to communicate to the Corinthians—and to humanity.

B. The first part of this teaching in v. 12-13 is that a believing spouse should not divorce his or her unbelieving spouse. If the unsaved one is content to continue to live together, that is good and should be maintained. In other words, to those who would ask, “What can I do about my unequal marriage—should I divorce?” Paul would say, “No, do not divorce. Stay married.” Marriage is *that* important that it should be protected even if it was begun wrongly or, in these cases, if a spouse became saved after the marriage began.

C. Sometimes people ask me a question about these things (hypothetically, for a friend, let’s say!). What if I have not done what Paul says here? So, if I divorced and remarried, what should I do? The answer is simple: stay with your current spouse! If I remarried someone who is not a Christian, what should I do? Stay with your spouse! Don’t over-think it. Whatever God has permitted or brought into your life at this point in your life in that way, don’t mess it up! Continue to do your best to honor God in it. By the way, note that marriage came long before God revealed the Christian faith. It came even before sin entered the world. It is an ancient and extremely important societal foundation.

So what to do if you have messed anything up in your past—or if someone else has messed it up for you? Let me avoid the awkwardness of any particular marital situation by changing the subject slightly. I have known people who have had an abortion (not to save the life of the mother). Then they became Christians. I assure them on the authority of God in the Bible that God forgives

all who come to Him in genuine repentant faith (1 John 1:9; Exodus 34:6-7; Psalm 32:5, 78:38, 85:1-4, 103:1-4; Jer. 31:34). That means that they recognized they sinned against God and the aborted soul, as well as other people.

To personalize it: worse than that, you have broken God's law repeatedly over the course of your life by coveting, using God's name in vain, thinking bad thoughts, not loving God above all else, and many other things.

If you acknowledge this in your heart and mind, believe that Christ died for your sins and rose again from the dead, and confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, then He promises to wash you clean from the dirt and stink of your sin, and from its guilt and penalty. You need not then despair about your sin, but rather can rejoice in the God Who saves. He has had mercy, He remembers mercy, and He extends mercy to you and to me.

Think of it—forgiven—for murder? Yes. The apostle Paul himself was forgiven for his part in murdering Christians. King David was forgiven after his sin with Bathsheba. Peter was restored after he denied Christ. The apostle Matthew was forgiven after being a tax collector!! Many a thief and idolater and liar and adulterer have found rest in God because of the work of Christ.

Let's be realistic here however, because some of the consequences of our choices last a long time. That's life. But God often graciously helps us with those consequences as well. So, not all hope is lost after a life lived wrongly or a situation dumped on you. You watch: when you ask, God will provide help even to deal with the remaining consequences of your sinful choices! God is so gracious to us!

D. Why is it important to keep marriages going? We could give reasons such as societal stability or the physical and emotional needs of the children. But Paul turns our attention elsewhere, to the *spiritual*. In verse 14 he says the unbelieving partner is "sanctified" by the believing one. This sanctification falls far short of salvation. It means that for the sake of the believing spouse, God's graciousness toward the saved spouse touches the unsaved spouse. The blessings that God bestows on the saved spouse are

shared by the unsaved in the family. They get more benefits than mere common grace gives to all humanity. God will spare unsaved in some cases from things simply because He does it for the sake of His own Christian children.

Extending this out to the next generation, the children of such a marriage are blessed by nature of having a believing parent in the home. They have access to something that many children have no access to—divine grace and instruction. The very presence of the believer makes an entire difference in the home. The children are “holy” in the sense of “sanctified” and instead of “common.” Don’t read this as some kind of class-ism or criticism against children who don’t have the blessing of a believing parent. Children are precious in God’s sight. But it seems obvious to admit that children who have no godly influence from parents or grandparents are at a distinct disadvantage in spiritual matters compared to children who have parents investing in their spiritual lives.

In other words, you as a believer should remain married because of the benefits that the others get from your relationship to the Lord. It is not all about YOU. It is about THEM and the Lord.

E. Verse 15 teaches that if the unbelieving spouse wants to leave, the believer is to peaceably allow that to occur. Supposing that the unbeliever has made up his (or her) mind to take the step of separation, then he must be allowed to do so. The Christian spouse is told to permit the divorce, to agree to it however grudgingly. The unbeliever is not commanded to depart (actually, God would “prefer” he stay). Rather, the Christian is to facilitate a *peaceful* transition. Marriage *is* worth fighting for, so to speak, but it is not right for the Christian to cause a big stink if the non-Christian partner wants to leave.

Why would the unbeliever want to leave? Hopefully, the unbeliever would find it very difficult to leave because the Christian spouse is so pleasant to live with. This could be the case if the unbeliever doesn’t appreciate the (perhaps new-found) faith of their partner, or any number of other reasons.

God has called us to be peaceful people, not pugnacious or contentious. We are to submit to the evident will of God, even if it comes from someone who is not a Christian.

- F. What does the text mean when it says the believer “is not under bondage” in such cases?
1. I am in the minority who hold that this means the believer is not bound to do anything and everything possible to keep the marriage going.
 2. Others interpret this to mean that the divorce frees the believer to be married to whomever they will in the Lord, because divorce (almost) always assumes the possibility of remarriage. In this latter interpretation, divorce and remarriage are possible in cases of death, adultery, or the unbeliever’s divorce.
 3. I am unable to embrace the latter approach with regard to adultery or unbelieving divorce for three reasons: (1) the Lord’s teaching in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18 about causing the spouses to commit adultery, (2) the “hardness of heart” teaching (Mark 10:5), and (3) the ultimate design of God in marriage for a man and woman to be married permanently (Mark 10:9).
- G. Verse 16 goes back to the subject of verses 12-14 to remind believing spouses that they have a mission field: their unsaved spouse. You may experience many frustrations in marriage with an unbeliever, but your influence may lead your spouse to Christ. Hopefully, an approach like that of 1 Peter 3:1-6 will bring the “non-Christian spouse around.” That’s *how* you can keep your marriage going with someone who is stubborn. By the way, you can also try it if your *Christian* spouse is in a “phase”!

That eternal fruit is valuable enough to “put up with” the difficulties of marriage with an unbeliever. But, connecting this back to verse 15, if the unbeliever wants to leave, this fact—that you *don’t know* whether the spouse would ever end up saved because of your ministry—allows you to let them go peaceably. They are in the hands of God, not your hands!

Conclusion

Once again, this passage extols a high view of marriage. Those not yet married need to file this away and plan to live by it. Those married need to work hard to keep their marriage working well. Do what

you can to avoid a bad outcome—but never compromise your faith, of course. Even more importantly, do what you can to make it a happy and enjoyable situation. That will necessitate a remarkable level of unselfishness, but it will honor God, the creator of marriage.

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