

1Corinthians 7:12-16 "What God Says About Divorce" - (Part 2)

As a quick reminder, this section of 1Corinthians has to do with some questions these believers asked of Paul. As he responds he begins with what evidently was something of great concern to the Corinthians and Paul as he begins with marriage.

There were those in Corinth who felt that the flesh and the spirit didn't mix well in any context, including marriage. Their reasoning was that the flesh only got in the way of the higher part of man, which is the spirit, and therefore it might be better if we cut off some of these relationships which permitted the body to enjoy the things of this world.

This was influenced by ancient Greek thought and these people for the most part were of Greek background. Some of them believed that to stay with their spouse might actually get in the way of having a proper spiritual relationship with Christ. To advance that spiritual relationship it appears that they entertained the idea of divorce in some cases, and choosing celibacy while remaining married, in other cases.

Paul is quick to point out that there is nothing spiritual about neglecting the will of God as it relates to marriage. The body and the spirit of man are united in this world and to try and separate them out in practice is to actually become counter-productive to the spiritual advancement of believers, if those practices are sanctioned in God's word and used biblically.

And so, again, if a person is practicing sexual relations, outside of marriage, that is nothing short of being fleshly and sinful according to God's word. But to practice sexual relations in marriage is encouraged and spiritual according to God's word since it is a union which was given to man by God in a spiritual context back in the Garden of Eden; man who is both flesh and spirit.

And so, this is the framework in which Paul answers these questions brought up by the Corinthian believers. Last week we touched on Paul's exhortation to the unmarried and the widows in the church at Corinth to remain single if that was possible. We found that in the context of this section the unmarried of verse 8 were those who were probably divorced which would have included those who were divorced as either unbelievers or believers.

Paul would make the distinction between believer and unbeliever and then address each as to what God's will is concerning remarriage. Verse 10 begins that process as he speaks to the married couples, which in the context, are those couples where both husband and wife are believers.

He gives instructions to them to remain together and uses the Lord Jesus' very teaching on the matter to support his position. He does, however, take into consideration that because of sin, there will always be the temptation to choose our own wills instead of God's.

And he gives instruction in verse 11, if that is the case, to remain unmarried or else be reconciled to their spouses. Without going into all of the teaching of last week concerning this issue let me just say that in a perfect world this would find its fulfillment in believers staying single if they had divorced a believing spouse.

Of course, in a perfect world there would not have been divorce in the first place. The truth of the matter is that divorce and remarriage takes place all the time among professing Christians. And though this sort of thing is certainly not the unpardonable sin, it should not be viewed as God's perfect will.

As it relates to believers married to unbelievers Paul continues to give instruction that is according to God's will.

1CO 7:12-16 "To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. 16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"

What we see here is God's perspective on the marriage union where one party has come to Christ while the other has remained in his or her unbelief. Paul is not suggesting that a believer can marry a non-believer and then try that out for a while until the unbelieving party decides that he or she can't hang with that arrangement.

He points out in his second letter to these same people not to be yoked to unbelievers. But it is interesting that for the believing party, who comes to Christ while in that marriage relationship, that they are actually not given the option to divorce the unbeliever, if the unbeliever wants to stay.

And what we see in this is God's recognition of the union of these two people as still being a legitimate union which can honor the Lord. And so, that physical as well as spiritual union still exists even among a believer and unbeliever in a marriage relationship.

Now, it is interesting that Paul begins verse 12 by saying: "To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord):..."

This is in contrast to what he said in verse 10: "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord):..."

Some have suggested that what Paul is saying here in verse 12 is his own opinion, not the Lord's and therefore it carries less spiritual weight. That's simply not the case. In verse 10 Paul is saying that there was actual teaching by Jesus Christ on this matter when he walked on this earth. In fact, in Matthew, Mark and Luke we see this very clearly.

The teaching Jesus gave was in connection to Israel and the people in Israel coming under the command by God in the OT not to divorce one another because the Lord hates divorce, even though He allowed Moses to give those in Israel permission to divorce under certain circumstances.

This is what Paul is referring to when he says, "To the married I give this command (*not I*, but the Lord):..." (Verse 10)

And so, when he says in verse 12 concerning instruction given to those couples where one becomes a believer and one doesn't, "to the rest I say this (I, *not the Lord*)", he simply means that Jesus did not teach on this specific area during His earthly ministry.

But, this does not mean to suggest that this is any less authoritative when it comes to the body of Christ heeding Paul's words. He is still speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and therefore it is still the authoritative word of God.

And then he says, "If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her."

In other words, if the unbeliever can hang with the other partner pursuing a relationship with Christ, then there is no reason to seek

a divorce; you are still one flesh and can still honor Christ in that marriage relationship.

Now, so as not to single out the privileges of the man in that relationship Paul adds in verse 13, "And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him."

Now, one of the reasons Paul may have added verse 13 is because in the ancient world it was often the man, in that marriage relationship, who had the exclusive right to pursue a divorce. This was true in Israel. The wife did not have that option.

There were of course exceptions to that in some ancient pagan cultures. But for the most part the wife had to endure and stay with the marriage until the husband decided that enough was enough.

Paul is saying that the Christian wife was to play an active role in deciding what was to happen in that marriage when her husband was not a believer. Now, up to this point Paul's instruction is clear for these mixed marriages; stay with your unbelieving mate if they are willing to stay.

Now, I know that some might raise objections if the unbeliever is abusive or threatens the life of the believing mate. Paul is giving a general rule here. And generally speaking, the believing mate is instructed to stay in that marriage as a ministry to Christ and the unbelieving partner.

And one of the reasons Paul gives this instruction, which comes from God Himself, is so that the unbeliever has an opportunity to come to Christ along with the rest of the family. Simply because one of the partners in that marriage is an unbeliever, does not mean that ministry can't be going on.

1CO 7:14 "For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy."

What does Paul mean by this? Well, the terms sanctified and holy, as they are used of those outside of the believing mate in that family, designate that God views them in a special way.

And you'll notice that Paul uses the present tense "has been sanctified" and "they are holy."

Does Paul use these terms in the same way for an unbeliever as he does with a believer? Well, we know that the terms used here are the exact same terms used for a believer who is set apart for God and are considered for a holy purpose to bring glory to God.

But as with any teaching which uses such words, the context must be brought to bear on such teaching from God's word. The word for sanctified in the Greek is *hagiazō*, and it includes the idea to separate from profane things and dedicate to God; to consecrate things to God, or to dedicate people to God, to purify."

Now, obviously if this person is an unbeliever they are not purified or consecrated in the same way as a believer who has been washed in the blood of the Lamb and forgiven of their sin as they place their faith in Christ who is now their Lord and Master.

By the very designation "unbeliever" they have not embraced Christ as Lord and Savior and they are not forgiven of their sin and washed in the blood if they remain unbelieving. But there is a sense in which, because of the believer in that family, the unbeliever is sanctified or holy; in other words set apart.

How so? Well, we know that it is very possible that the influence of the world, including unbelievers, can adversely affect our relationship with Christ if we allow it. Part of what Paul is saying here is that the believer in that family can actually positively effect that marriage.

John MacArthur points out that "being unequally yoked, one flesh with an unbeliever, can be frustrating, discouraging, and even costly. But it need not be defiling because one believer can sanctify a home. One Christian in a home can grace the entire home. God's indwelling that believer and all the blessings and graces that flow into the believer's life from heaven will spill over to enrich all who are near."

What a great opportunity for that believing spouse to share God's word with that unbelieving partner. What a great opportunity to show forth the love of Christ by being a servant in that marriage relationship whether husband or wife, and to show the other spouse the life and the hope Christ has given through faith.

What a great opportunity for the believer in that relationship to come before the very throne of God and bring his or her family before God as they ask that the Lord would soften the heart and

open the eyes and ears of the unbeliever so they may see and hear what God has accomplished through Christ.

In fact, it is often the case where the believing partner can only pray and live the life before the unbelieving partner who at some point says, 'I don't want to hear any more of this Jesus or Christianity.'

To force the issue may actually drive a deeper wedge between those two people. It doesn't mean one gives up in sharing the gospel, it just means that they are more careful to wait for an opportunity where the unbeliever is open to listen. But if they're not then we must consider what Peter says in his first letter.

1PE 3:1-2 "Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, ***they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives***, 2 when they see the purity and reverence of your lives."

By extension, the husband, too, may win over his unbelieving wife with his behavior as his new life in Christ demonstrates that he has been made a new creature in Christ and he should follow Paul's instruction concerning husbands and wives found in Ephesians.

EPH 5:25 "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..."

It's all about representing Christ in that home and knowing that the Lord has allowed you to be in a marriage where the other partner is an unbeliever, but who now has the opportunity to see Christ at work in the heart of one of His people with the express purpose of being a witness in both word and deed.

In this sense the unbelieving spouse is set apart and consecrated in that relationship in a very special way as they are exposed to God's will and His salvation which is found in no one else but Christ. And it is the believing spouse who has the privilege and is responsible to shine for Christ in that circumstance.

The Lord can certainly bless the believing spouse in that relationship by using them to bring the other person to Christ. But there is also a sense in which the children in that relationship are also made holy or set apart, not unlike the unbelieving husband or wife.

The children are loved by God, and the believing parent has a great advantage to influence them to the gospel at an early age. Often

times the children will follow the believing parent in his or her faith. Each must make their own choice for Christ, but what a great influence a believing parent has on their children.

The Lord can and does often use that believing parent to lead the children to Christ which furthers the ability of the believing parent to be able to reach the unbeliever. There's nothing like the children looking into the eyes of mom or dad, who doesn't believe, and to say to them, 'daddy/mommy, Jesus died for the sins of His people, and I want you to be one of His people.'

The truth of God's word, coupled with the love of Christ, is a grace given in that relationship by God which should never be overlooked and should give comfort and hope to the believing spouse who finds that their mate wants to stay in that relationship.

And yet, there is always the possibility that the unbelieving partner wants out because of a variety of reasons, including the fact that they can't tolerate this Jesus who has transformed the life of their believing mate. Many times they just can't stand the conviction of their own sin and the need to repent.

They may think that separating themselves from the "problem" found in their believing spouse is the only answer. To this Paul also has a word from God.

1CO 7:15-16 "But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace 16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"

Let's look at verse 15. "But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace."

A word of caution should be mentioned here because there may be the temptation to live at peace at all costs, including causing anything but peace in the home to try and drive that guy out of the house.

I'm sure there were those believing partners who wished their spouse would leave and didn't like the idea of having to stay in that relationship if the unbeliever decided to stay. But to force them out is not what Paul suggests.

But, assuming that the believer has done everything to honor the Lord and to try and lead the unbelieving spouse to Christ in a godly way, and the other partner still decides to leave, Paul then says, let them go.

And what's really interesting here is that God is the One who says to let them go, since this word is inspired by Him. In such a case God desires that the peace to which the believer was called in Christ, may be able to grow and flourish in a way where their lives can actually be peaceful.

You'll notice too that Paul declares that the brother or sister is not bound or under bondage in such cases. And so, we have three conditions under which a believer may divorce, according to God's word.

According to Rom.7:2... "by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage."

Another reason would be unfaithfulness by one of the partners according to MAT 19:9 "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

And now, the third reason would be where a believing spouse has his or her unbelieving partner leaving that relationship. Under these conditions the Scriptures would permit remarriage.

But, so as to not give a believing mate the false hope that their mate will in fact come to Christ, and therefore not to allow the unbelieving spouse to leave if they want to, Paul continues with verse 16.

1CO 7:16 "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"

I'm sure there were believers in Corinth who loved their spouses and didn't want to even think of having them leave. I'm sure they would have done anything to see them come to Christ, and in so doing would certainly entertain the idea of not allowing a divorce to proceed.

There was also the practical problem for women who were supported solely by their husbands and who would have found themselves in dire financial straits if their unbelieving husbands

left and then used that incentive to make sure they came to Christ even if they had to force feed them.

For these people Paul says that you still have to let them go if they choose to do so, even if you have no intention of ever remarrying again.

Paul makes these people consider the reality that even with all of their efforts, ‘how do you know they’ll come to Christ?’

If their hearts are bent on leaving that relationship because you’re a believer, what makes you think that you can save them? And by the way, Paul’s theology on soteriology, which is the doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ, which would include the way in which a person is saved, should not be called into question here.

What I mean is that Paul knows that no human being can save another human being when it comes to finding our forgiveness in Christ by faith. You’ll remember earlier in this letter Paul makes it abundantly clear that as important as our role is in bringing people the gospel of Jesus Christ and being that witness in deed and word, no one but God can turn the heart of a person to see his need for Christ.

1CO 3:5-7 "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe - as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow."

So, when Paul says, ‘how do you know you will save your husband or wife?’, he is actually teaching here that you can’t save your husband or wife. And for that matter you don’t even ultimately know if God is going to turn their hearts.

Remember, this is in the context of the unbelieving spouse leaving by divorcing the believing spouse. Paul is essentially saying that you’ve done your job of being that living testimony to what Christ has done in your life and now it’s beyond your ability, spiritually speaking, to turn their hearts if they reject Christ, in a sense, by rejecting Christ’s witness in that relationship.

This doesn’t mean that God may not turn their hearts at a later time, but with the immediate problem of the unbeliever wanting to leave, you don’t know if in forcing him or her to stay just 3 more months, that that will be enough time to save your mate and your marriage.

As we consider what Paul has been saying here as he instructs these believers in Corinth I hope we all see the importance of being that witness for Christ. Whether it's in our marriages or in our jobs, or in everyday life, we are called to be His representatives in both word and deed.

The believing spouse in an unequally yoked marriage is given the responsibility to represent Christ. It's not an option, and neither is it an option for any of us who represent Christ in the world to think we can live for Christ any way we want. But praise God the Lord gives us the strength, the grace and His word to know how to do it and the ability to go forth.

ROM 6:13-14 "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. 14 For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace."

Unlike that unbelieving spouse who was sanctified or set apart in a matrimonial sense for being exposed to the gospel, we who are in Christ are set apart and sanctified in an eternal sense. And in that sense we must live as people who are holy and set apart in this world to faithfully represent Christ in the power of the Spirit out of thankful and grateful hearts.

1PE 1:13-16 "Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. 14 As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 15 But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16 for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

Let me end with an encouragement from Paul as he wrote to the church in Thessalonica.

2TH 2:16-17 "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, 17 encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word."