

1 Corinthians 7:8-11 ⁸ But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. ⁹ But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn *with passion*. ¹⁰ But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband ¹¹ (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

Paul has been dealing with a relatively carnal church in Corinth at the writing of this letter. And even when they tried to be spiritual they had a tendency to turn even that into something fleshly.

Even with something as precious as marriage, some of these Corinthian believers felt that if the flesh only got in the way of our relationship with Christ, then like that hand or eye, which Jesus alludes to in Matthew's gospel, we should cut it off and throw it away.

Well, Jesus was no more making the point that everyone in this world should be walking around with eye patches or hooks on one of our arms than that Paul is making the point that the natural and godly desires towards your mate, in a marriage relationship, is bad.

There are certain aspects of life that God has designed to be a good thing. But out of its proper context it can be a bad thing. And in the case of a man or woman outside of marriage having sexual relations, Paul says it's not proper, according to God's word.

1CO 7:1 "Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

But he in no way discourages people from entering into marriage if that's what God has planned for their lives.

1CO 7:2 "But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband."

And yet, we come to the end of Paul's thought here in our text and it seems apparent that if Paul had a preference it would be that each person were single like he is.

1CO 7:7 "I wish that all men were as I am...."

But as we explained last time, Paul's desire is that each person would have the freedom, like he had, to be able to serve the Lord

without any other obligations; in this case, without having to serve a wife or husband.

But he in no way intended to say that marriage was a worse state to be in, or that being single was really the best way. He's speaking for himself and knows clearly what God's will is regarding marriage, and the beauty of that relationship which God Himself designed for mankind.

That's why he ended verse 7 the way he did. "But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that."

Being married, as unto the Lord, is a gift from God and should be understood in that context. But, being single, and having a desire to remain single to serve the Lord in that capacity, is also a gift from God.

Paul is simply saying that I glory in the gift God has given me and I use it to His honor. Now, use the gift God has given you to love and serve Him in the state He has placed you.

You see, whether single or married, God expects that every one of His people be serving Him. And by that, it would include not only serving our spouse and family, but also the serving of our church, family and the world.

I mean, Peter was a man who was called by God to be an apostle, which evidently kept him busy serving the church and the world of his day. But he also had responsibilities in his home serving his wife. We know that he, and most of the apostles, were married according to what Paul wrote about him in this very letter.

1CO 9:5 "Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas (that is, Peter)?"

I suspect Peter loved his wife and she probably had to follow Peter to many of the places he went in serving the body of Christ. So, there's no indication that you can't serve the Lord being single or married. But for Paul it was his gift to be single as a servant of the Most High God.

And so, as we continue in our text Paul gives an encouragement to another group of people in the church there in Corinth.

1CO 7:8 "Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am."

Here Paul addresses two groups and encourages them in a way that would suggest that if they desired to stay unmarried that would be a good thing in terms of them being able to serve the Lord.

The one group is identified as those who are unmarried. The second group are widows and would in all likelihood include widowers.

Now, we all know what a widow is. It's a woman who had been married, but because of one reason or another, lost her husband to death. Paul says to this woman, and by extension a man in that same condition, to consider remaining single as a viable way to serve the Lord in the body of Christ.

As in Paul's case, he has proved that being single can be a very effective way of reaching people you might not be able to if you were married. You have certain freedoms as a single person which the Lord can use in a very advantageous way for the gospel of Christ.

From a financial stand-point you don't have to worry about supporting a family. You can live on less. You're not necessarily tied down to one location. You can have an easier time moving where the Lord wants you to go. Your prayer life can concentrate more on the church and those in the world, rather than on your husband or children.

Again, this is not to suggest that having a husband, or wife and children to pray for is in some way burdensome. It's not. It's just different. It's a gift from God that takes more time and effort, and yet God still expects that wives and husbands be serving in the church, even as Peter did.

But the other group Paul speaks of in verse 8 is a little harder to identify and yet the context makes it clear who he's speaking to. He calls them, simply, unmarried.

The Greek word for unmarried doesn't help in identifying this group because it too simply means unmarried.

But they are a distinct group because Paul gives further indication that this group of unmarried's are not widows and they're not virgins, where in verse 25 Paul specifically addresses virgins as a separate category.

This leaves one other likely alternative; these people who are unmarried in verse 8 are those who once were married but are now divorced.

And so, he says to these people, if you have been divorced, (and here he has not made a distinction of being divorced before or after becoming a Christian), then you should remain unmarried for the sake of the gospel.

And so, whether you're a divorcee, or a widow, consider staying single for Christ, is Paul's message to these people. But again, Paul is not so unrealistic as to think that God may want some of these people to be married again. And in their marriages they may be able to serve the Lord in ways a single person couldn't.

1CO 7:9 "But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion."

This is not a jab at people who have once been married and then found themselves single. Paul is not saying that you are less spiritual if you don't remain single. He would certainly say that being single may have certain benefits regarding your service for Christ, but he also realizes that you can't change the spots of a leopard.

If God has not gifted you to remain celibate, then to try and fight the passions you once knew being married, could actually cause you to sin in ways that would deter you from serving Christ at all.

And so, he's saying that if you can't control those desires, which were a part of your life in the past, then by all means, consider getting married again. "It is better to marry than to burn with passion."

And here the passion is not the bad thing, but the burning is. It suggests that the flames can't be quenched other than in a godly marriage relationship. So, if God provides another partner, go for it.

However, there should also be a word of caution. Simply to have desires to be married doesn't mean that there shouldn't still be some sort of self-control until the Lord provides that mate.

This doesn't mean that a woman or a man simply go for the first thing that crosses his or her path who happens to be of the opposite sex and is breathing. There are still guidelines God has laid down in His word for Christians.

Christians do not have the freedom to get intimate with and ultimately marry an unbeliever. Paul makes this clear in his second letter to these same people.

2CO 6:14 "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?"

This is not a request. This is a command. To be yoked is to be tied to. And this is an expression which is linked to being yoked or tied to a person in a marriage relationship. But, it carries with it the idea of not even pursuing someone, in a dating sense, (as we understand it in the western world), who is an unbeliever.

Dating may not be the equivalent of marriage, but in many societies, including ours, it is often the means to becoming married. So, even there, such pursuits can certainly become ungodly and should be avoided.

It's often too late to think sensibly about what God says on marriage when you've become emotionally attached to an unbeliever; maybe never having had any intention to enter into a marriage relationship with that person. But it does happen. So, why place yourself in that situation? Why tempt yourself with a passion that should never find its fulfillment being yoked to an unbeliever?

Now, as we move on, Paul is going to address that one category he mentioned earlier as he also exhorts those believers who are presently married to another believer.

1CO 7:10-11 "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. 11 But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife."

In this section Paul is clearly speaking to those couples who are presently married to another believer. And by inference might include some of those who are the "unmarried" in verse 8 who had been divorced from a believing spouse.

Now, the reason we know this is because Paul does not give the same command to those who had been, or might soon be, divorced from an unbeliever. We'll deal with that later. But, let's look at verses 10 and 11 first.

First , Paul says, "to the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord)."

Again, in this case the married are those who include both a believing wife and husband; Paul doesn't give commands to unbelievers. But then Paul makes it clear that this is something the Lord Himself has taught on, which is not a suggestion, but a command. One of the places Jesus taught on this would be found in Matthew's gospel.

MAT 5:32 "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

MAT 19:6 "So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Similar teachings of our Lord are also found in Mark and Luke. But, Paul's point here is that this teaching is not a new one, but was something which finds its origins in the O.T. Scriptures and is then expounded upon by Jesus Himself.

And so, Paul is simply giving them what Jesus has already taught on, and that is, "A wife must not separate from her husband."

It is clear from this passage and others that divorce for a Christian is not God's will. It is actually going against God's will to pursue that path. Now, that alone should be a very strong deterrent for a believing couple not to even entertain such an idea, which should then compel that Christian couple to try and reconcile any problem they may have according to God's word.

Now, in a perfect world, the believing couple would do everything to reconcile and then actually accomplish that reconciliation in the power of the Spirit according to God's prescribed means of walking in His ways according to His word.

Unfortunately, we don't live in a perfect world. This is not an excuse for sin, it simply means that many Christians, for a variety of reasons, will choose to cut that marriage relationship off.

I'm not going to get into all of the possible reasons Christians may choose to go that route. There may be as many different reasons as there are Christians; and some of them may appear pretty good from a human stand-point.

But Paul's point is not to give reasons for why a Christian may do this, only that there are things they should consider from God's perspective if they choose that route.

In fact, Jesus Himself, during His earthly ministry, recognized that His chosen people, the Israelites, were also practicing divorce, despite the fact that the Lord told them that He hated divorce.

MAR 10:2-7 "Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" 3 "What did Moses command you?" he replied. 4 They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." 5 "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. 6 "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 7 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife,..."

What Jesus was referring to was the law God gave to Moses regarding this very thing. It was not a law of divorce, or a law sanctioning divorce as God's will, but only a law which recognized the sinfulness of men, and when they chose to divorce God gave certain guidelines.

Now, there does appear to be an exception to this when Jesus addresses divorce in Matthew.

MAT 5:32 "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

Even here, Jesus is not commanding someone to get a divorce because their partner was unfaithful, but rather, He views it as a sinful practice on the part of the offender, whereby the offended party is permitted to pursue a divorce under that circumstance.

This is still in keeping with what our Lord told the Pharisees in Mar.10:4-5. "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,"

And so, in this one case of unfaithfulness it may be permitted, but it is not required. And so, Paul's exhortation still stands. "A wife must not separate from her husband."

But, because Paul also understands that there may be circumstances where the wife or husband reasons, according to

their own take on the problem, that they cannot and therefore will not, abide by this command from God, and so they will separate.

And by the way, the word separate here in our text is not talking about what we might understand as a separation, where the spouse takes time out from the other partner without going through the legal proceeding of a divorce for a while, with the idea of possibly getting back with each other.

The word separation here in our text is the equivalent of divorce. And so, if the divorce takes place between two professing believers Paul has a word for them.

1CO 7:11 "But if she does [divorce], she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife."

What is Paul saying here? Well, it's rather straight forward. "If she does [divorce], she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband." This would hold true for the believing husband seeking a divorce from his believing wife as well.

This is God's will for those believers who choose to go down this path. Now, there are some things which should be mentioned here in light of such a command. 1) There are real consequences to sin. 2) God takes marriage seriously.

The consequences are that a broken covenant made before the Lord is just that. Covenants are made to the Lord to be kept. If we leave the option open to break such a covenant, then why make a covenant in the first place?, is part of what is inferred from all of this.

Now, I'm rather confident that a Christian couple does not go into marriage with the idea of having divorce as an option. I'm only saying that if this were the case, where they believed it was an option, then the covenant of marriage would be a joke.

In God's eyes such a covenant, in most cases, is not really dissolved through divorce, otherwise He could never say, "that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." (MAT 5:32)

That's pretty strong language. But the reason it's so strong is so that we would think long and hard before going in that direction. But here's the problem. Christian couples do get divorced. And

those individual Christians are not exempt from the passions Paul speaks of in verse 9 of our text, even though Paul would not hold out that same option to them of getting remarried.

So here's the dilemma for such a Christian: Do I burn with passion and sin in one way, or do I get remarried, even though it's not God's will for me? This is real life. And again, it demonstrates the awfulness of sin and how it can complicate life, not only of the individual, but also the lives of those around such a person.

But this does raise another potential problem. How does the church deal with a Christian who has been divorced and remarried? Do we shun them? Do we exclude them from fellowship? Do we put a big red "D" on all of their clothes?

Well, I would be the first to admit that what Paul teaches here is the truth. God hates divorce. God desires that such a Christian who has been divorced not remarry. But I also know that even God can forgive such sin. It doesn't mean that such forgiveness gets rid of all consequences of the sin, but it does mean that the love of Christ has not been taken away from them.

And if the Lord still loves them, shouldn't we? I don't think any Christian who has gone through a divorce would be proud of such a thing and recommend it for everyone, any more than a Christian who has sinned in the way of adultery, theft, murder or anything else would recommend going down those paths.

But as each Christian deals with sin before God in a repentant way I believe that each Christian can get on with their life in their forgiveness found in Christ and become productive members of the body of Christ. Yes, God hates divorce, but I don't believe it's the unpardonable sin.

If we each had to live with the stigma of any sin in our lives, even after becoming Christians, it would be difficult for any of us to look at one another without wondering if any of us were fit to be servants for God.

I'll let God's word on this subject stand on its own. I don't need to apologize for God when He teaches on this subject. But, I also know that sinners can be forgiven in Christ. David was a murderer and an adulterer, among other things, and yet found favor in the eyes of the Lord as he desired to be reconciled to God through faith.

This kind of teaching should be a warning to those in the body of Christ who would consider walking in any way other than in the revealed will of God. But it should also be an encouragement to the body to know that we humbly can come to our Lord and seek forgiveness, and know that we can find it.

1JO 2:1-2 "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 2 He is the one who turns aside God's wrath, taking away our sins, and not only ours but also the sins of the whole world."

Again, this is not some sort of fire insurance. We must view our God's grace as a gift which should not be trampled because we have a desire to do our own thing. God's will is still God's will. But, if we're in a situation where the damage has been done, then may we come before our God and seek Him as our only Savior and Lord.

Life can certainly get complicated, but we don't have to make it any worse by treating other believers as lepers. Sin has a way of creating its own kind of consequences. And wherever we are in life we still need to consider that. Until we see Christ face to face we will always be dealing with such things to one degree or another.

It does not mean that God is delighting to beat us with a big stick because of decisions we've made that are out of accord with His will. When He forgives He forgives completely. In Christ we are no longer at war with God. He has made peace with us through the shed blood of Christ and we should rejoice in that and walk accordingly.

We still need to encourage each other and constantly point each other to the love and mercy found in Christ. And hopefully, as we consider so great a gift, we may find ourselves desiring to live thankful, grateful lives to the glory of our God and Savior.

COL 3:15-17 "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."