

Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 14th November 2004

I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. 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. 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. 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. 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. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

1 Corinthians 7:7-16

Introduction

The statisticians tell us that in Britain today a very large proportion of people cohabit without getting married. Of those who do get married, about 50% land up getting divorced. Clearly the institution of marriage is in difficulty. And, not surprisingly, these problems are not confined to the world. These problems seep from the surrounding culture into the church, and, for example, we sometimes hear of professing believers divorcing each other. If we are not constantly on our guard, we can easily find ourselves thinking and acting in the same way as our unbelieving neighbours. So it will do us good to hear the teaching of Scripture on these matters so as to be on our guard against wrong thinking and living.

1 Corinthians chapter 7 verses 7 to 17 has teaching for people in different groups: for the unmarried, for those who are married to believers, and for those who are married to unbelievers. We shall consider what the apostle says to each of these three groups in turn.

1. For the unmarried: stay single if you can, otherwise marry

In verses 8 and 9 the apostle addresses those who are unmarried, and also those who have lost a spouse through death. To them he repeats what he has previously said in verses 1 and 7 of this chapter, that not to marry, or not to remarry if you are widowed, is a perfectly valid option. "It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am," he says. Paul was not married, and he was able to live a fulfilled and happy life as a single man. Jesus was also unmarried. It would be quite OK for you never to get married. If you do not have any strong sexual urges and you are not likely to be tempted into sexual immorality, then this is an option you should seriously consider.

But, the apostle goes on to say, not everyone is without sexual urges or temptations. For some these desires are very strong indeed and very difficult to keep under control. What should

they do? They should seek to get married. "If they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion." The "with passion" has been added by our translators. The literal translation is "better to marry than to burn."

Now what the apostle says here might perhaps beg a question in someone's mind. Is he saying that sexual attraction is the only and sufficient reason to marry someone? Are there any other things a Christian should consider if he or she is considering marriage?

One clear thing that the Bible says about whom you should marry is that it would not be right for a Christian to marry an unbeliever. To be sure, later on in this passage the apostle gives teaching for a person who finds himself in a marriage with an unbeliever. But the apostle says in verse 39 that a woman

whose husband dies is "free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord" or literally "in the Lord." A widow should only marry a fellow believer. We would be wrong to take apply only to widows this command that a woman should marry only a believer. Moreover, in 2 Corinthians 6.14 – 7.1 the apostle warns against being "yoked together with unbelievers". This passage clearly has application to more than just marriage, but what is marriage if it is not a "yoking together" of two individuals? So we must conclude that it would be quite wrong for a man to deliberately enter into a marriage with an unbeliever. And it would be wrong for a Christian woman to marry an unbeliever. Because of this, it would also be quite wrong for a Christian man to court a non-Christian woman, and "go out" with her, and vice-versa.

Apart from this, the Scriptures are remarkably silent about whom we should marry. As a Christian you are free to marry anyone you wish to marry provided he or she is a believer. It would be wise for you to marry someone who has a godly

character: this will make your marriage much easier and happier. If you are a woman, you would be wise to ask yourself, is he a Christian whose lead you can willingly and gladly follow, whose judgement you trust? If you are a man, you would be wise to ask yourself, is this woman teachable? Will she respond and submit as you seek to lead her according to Scripture? And obviously, you would be wise to ask yourself if you enjoy being in the person's company, and if you find him or her attractive.

But apart from prohibitions about marrying a close relation, or marrying someone who is already married, the only requirement in Scripture is that you marry a believer. No-one can say to you that you are sinning or doing wrong just because you are marrying someone they do not like or think particularly suitable.

I believe it is important to say this, because my observation is that sometimes people who need to be married, and would benefit from being married, do not marry because they set such high standards for a potential spouse that no-one is ever found who will match the necessary criteria. I have also heard of people who are dissuaded from marriage by their parents or friends, not because the proposed partner is not a Christian, but because he or she comes from what is considered to be an inappropriate social background or racial group. Do not allow yourself to be bound by other people's expectations (including your parents' expectations) for your future marriage partner. There is also a widely held false idea that you need to be "in love" and have butterflies in your stomach

for you to marry someone, and that if you do not have this sense of excitement when you see him or her then you cannot get married. This idea owes itself more to Hollywood than to the Bible. The crucial question is, is he, is she, a Christian? If so, and if you have sexual urges, and if the person you have in mind has a godly character, and you get on well with him or

her, and he or she would be willing to marry you, do not pass up the opportunity because of some false idealistic view of what a future husband or wife should be like.

2. For those married to believers: do not get divorced

In verses 10 and 11 the apostle addresses those who are married to believers, and says, effectively, that they should not get divorced. "A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife."

The apostle says that it is "not I but the Lord" who says this. In other words, the command he is giving is based upon the teaching of Christ while he was on earth. This teaching is recorded for us in a number of places in the Gospels, the fullest example being in Matthew 19.1 – 9. The Pharisees came to Jesus with a trick question. They asked "Is it lawful [in other words, in line with God's commandments] for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" In his reply, Jesus pointed them to the pattern for marriage laid down in the beginning. "Haven't you read," he said, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female', and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together let man not separate." God's plan for marriage from the beginning was that one man should marry one woman for life. When they are married they are joined together by God, so no man should seek to separate that union. The Pharisees, thinking they had got Jesus in a trap, then came back at Jesus and asked why Moses "commanded" that a man should give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away. Jesus replied that Moses permitted, not commanded, divorce because of the

hardness of men's hearts. But this was not God's plan from the beginning. And then he added, "I tell you, that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman, commits adultery."

So the teaching of Christ is quite plain. Divorce was allowed and regulated from a legal point of view under the Old Testament law. (We need to remember that

the Old Testament law served two purposes, both to give moral teaching and to give laws for the government of society. This was a law to regulate society, and protect vulnerable women from misuse by their husbands divorcing them and then taking them back again at whim.) But divorce has never been according to God's plan for marriage. God tells us in Malachi 2.16 that he hates divorce. If a man divorces his wife for any reason other than because of his wife's adultery, and then remarries, as far as God is concerned he is committing the sin of adultery. And if a woman was to do the same with her husband, she would be committing adultery.

So divorce is a non-option for the Christian, unless he or she is the innocent party where the other party in a marriage has committed adultery. God sees marriage as a lifelong bond between a man and his wife. They have been "joined together" by God. No man has got the right to break that bond, and if he were to do so, he would provoke God's great displeasure. Hebrews 13.4 says "Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and the sexually immoral." At the heart of marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman. If a man seeks to divorce his wife he is breaking faith with her; he is breaking his covenant. God hates that because he is a faithful God who keeps his word, and who for this reason expects us to keep our word.

Now here we see that there is a direct clash between the teaching of the Bible and what is legally permissible in our

society. It was not long ago that the law on divorce in this country reflected the teaching of Scripture and it was only possible to divorce your spouse if you could prove in a court of law that he or she was guilty of adultery. Now it is legally possible to obtain a divorce on the grounds of the alleged "unreasonable behaviour" of the spouse. But the point is this: even if something is legally possible, it does not make it right in God's sight. And the teaching of Scripture is very clear that "unreasonable behaviour" does not provide a legitimate basis for divorce in God's sight.

The apostle does allow, however, for separation. He does not commend it, but makes allowance for it. One can think of instances where a wife might feel she has to separate from her husband, for her own protection and for the protection of her children, for example if the husband were an alcoholic, or a drug addict, or was violent or grossly abusive verbally. The apostle says that a wife may separate from her husband but if she does so she should either remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. She should not divorce

her husband and marry another man. And by the same token, the husband should not divorce his wife and marry someone else.

We need to admit quite frankly that, whilst some marriages are very happy and a great blessing for those involved, others can have times of great stress and unhappiness. There can be arguments, misunderstandings, a breakdown in trust, hurtful things said, and for some people their marriage can seem like a living nightmare from which you never wake up. The temptation in such circumstances is to go for the "quick fix", to get a divorce and marry someone else. That is not a valid option for a Christian man or woman.

What then can a Christian do, then, if he or she feels their spouse is behaving unreasonably? Here are some things I would suggest:

1. Examine your own heart to see if there is anything in your own behaviour that you need to repent of. If you are a woman have you submitted to your husband in the way you should have? If you are a man, have you loved your wife as you should have? If necessary repent and ask for forgiveness from your spouse.

2. Pray about the situation.

3. Try speaking with your spouse, calmly and quietly, about what you believe to be his or her wrong behaviour. You may find it helpful to make a list of the things to speak about, and book some time together when neither of you are under pressure and when you are out of hearing of any children. If you are a woman you will need to do this with respect without "lecturing" your husband. Ask him respectfully how his behaviour matches with the teaching of Scripture, and point out verses which would seem to contradict the behaviour of your husband.

4. If your spouse will not listen to you, or you are not satisfied with his or her answers, ask to see him or her with one or more mature believers from the church. Matthew 18.15 – 17 gives clear teaching on what to do if your brother sins against you and will not repent, and I see no reason why this passage should not be applied if your "brother" happens to be your husband or wife.

5. If you feel you have to separate from your spouse because of his or her unreasonable behaviour, do all you can to prevent this from becoming a permanent separation, or resulting in divorce. Maintain as much contact with

your spouse as possible. Look for ways of re-establishing the marriage. Do not contemplate divorce. NEVER be alone with someone of the opposite sex. Try to avoid doing anything from your side which might be misconstrued, or might result in a further breakdown in trust.

3. For those in mixed marriages: live with your spouse if he or she will live with you

The apostle then goes on in verses 12 – 16 to speak about what should happen in the situation where a believer is married to an unbeliever. It may be that some in Corinth were saying that in this sort of situation the believer should leave the unbeliever, because otherwise he or she might be “polluted” by contact with the unbeliever.

I have already indicated that it would be wrong for a Christian deliberately to enter into a marriage relationship with an unbeliever, but for someone who is in that situation, whether because of their disobedience or because they were converted after their marriage, the teaching of the apostle is quite clear: you should not do anything on your side to end the marriage. If you are a Christian woman and your non-Christian husband is willing to carry on living with you, do not leave your husband or seek a divorce. And the same applies if you are a Christian man married to a non-Christian.

The apostle says “I say this, not the Lord.” By saying this, he does not mean that this is just his opinion, and it is not a binding command. What he is saying is that this is something which Jesus had not spoken about, because the church had not yet come into being while he was on earth. What the apostle says here is the Word of God.

Paul says you do not need to worry about being “contaminated” by contact with your non-Christian spouse, because the “unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.” (verse 14). By “sanctified” the apostle cannot mean that the unbeliever has been saved from his sin, because he goes on to say in verse 16 that salvation is a possibility for the unbelieving partner for the future. I believe that what it means is that the whole relationship, and indeed the whole household, is treated as “clean”, and is under God’s

blessing on account of the faith of the believer in that household. You do not need to fear that your household will be “outside God’s blessing” on account of your non-Christian

spouse, or that the only way to know God’s blessing is for you to leave your non-Christian spouse and set up on your own. Maybe you feel that your spouse is “holding you back” and that if only you were not married you would be able to “serve God” more effectively. This is a lie of Satan. Your primary responsibility as a Christian is to your husband or wife, and to your children. You cannot “serve the Lord” properly if you are neglecting these responsibilities.

And, he says, you never know what might happen in the future. “How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?” Things might seem to be very grim now. Your spouse may not be a Christian, or may be seriously backsliding. Your relationship may be quite superficial at the moment, because Jesus Christ is your Lord and Saviour, but his authority is not recognised by your spouse. But you never know how things might change. As you live with your spouse in a Christian way, if you are a wife humbly submitting, and if you are a husband loving as Christ loves the church, you never know what God may do on your spouse’s life.

So if you are a believer who is married to an unbeliever, do not seek a divorce from your spouse. Do not act in a way which will give him or her any encouragement to divorce you. If, however, you are a Christian whose unbelieving spouse is determined to leave you and to divorce you, then the apostle says “let him do so” and he adds “a believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances.” And by the term “not bound”, he clearly means that the believing party is freed from the marriage bond in such circumstances, and would be free to marry another. He adds “God has called us to live in peace.” Do not have some bitter and protracted battle with an

unbeliever who is determined to leave you. If he or she really wants to go, let him or her go.

This sermon has touched on some matters which, for some, are very painful indeed. Some single people long for marriage, and have strong sexual urges, but have as yet not been able to marry, and this is a constant source of grief for them. Others are married, but their experience of marriage is far from ideal, with a distant and strained relationship with their spouse. Is there anything that can be said, before we close, to help those who are in pain because of their marital state, married or unmarried?

The thing I would say is what the apostle goes on to say in verses 29 – 31 in this passage:

What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

Remember, this world, with its joys and its sorrow is passing away. In just a few more years you will die and go to be with the Lord if you are a Christian, or you will die and go to Hell if you are not a Christian. The really important thing is not "Am I married? Have I met the man or woman of my dreams?" Nor is it, if you are married, "Is my marriage a happy one?" The really important question is this: "Am I a Christian? What will happen to me when I die? Will I go to heaven or hell?" If you are not a Christian, come to Christ for salvation. And if you are a Christian, then rejoice. If you have Christ, you have all you really need, whether or not you are married, and whether or not your marriage is a happy one. Do not look for a "fix" for your situation which is out of God's will. Continue to trust God

and do what is right, and he will reward you, if not in this life in the life to come.

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