

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

9 Keep Your Vows

Scripture Reading

1 Corinthians 7:10 – 16

Answers For Corinth

Apparently the believers in Corinth had some questions and they wanted answers. So beginning in chapter 7 Paul sets out to address their concerns. The first, which we began to look at last week had to do with matters of marriage, divorce and remarriage.

So far it is clear that:

- In the face of all the sexual pressures around us Christians should get married (verse 2).
- For the same reason every married couple should have a good, active sexual relationship (verse 3).
- A wife's body belongs to her husband and a husband's body belongs to his wife. Each has a duty to please the other (verse 4).
- Abstinence from sexual relations by a married couple is to be avoided unless they agree to do so for a short time, so that they do not give Satan an opportunity to tempt them because of their lack of self control, and only so that they can give themselves more fully to prayer and fasting and (verse 5).

But one thing was not so clear. Was Paul really saying it is better to be single but if you cannot control yourself then get married if you have to? That would be in conflict with his own teaching in other places.

We looked at some possible explanations. Perhaps the church at Corinth was facing circumstances which, for that present time, meant it would be better not to get married. Perhaps the passage is not about marriage so much as it is about self control and Paul is teaching that it is good to avoid immoral sexual relationships but instead each man and each woman should get married and satisfy his or her desires that way. Or maybe the second part of verse one is merely quoting back a statement that the Corinthians have put to Paul for comment, and the remainder of the chapter is refuting it. It all depends on what that original question was but do take note: the main teaching of the passage is clear and anything that is not clear is dealt with elsewhere in a way that leaves no doubt.

What About Those Who Are Married Already?

Whatever was going on it must have been there were at least some in Corinth who were advocating that Christians should not be married. Perhaps it was a reaction against the gross immorality that would have been going on around them and that fact that marriage did not count for much in Corinth that caused them to say, the best way to avoid immorality is to avoid sex altogether. Verse 10 suggests that they were even going so far as to say that people who were married already should separate.

Paul's answer to that is clear and firm: separation (whichever partner might initiate it) in these circumstances is not on. Why not? Because Jesus Himself said so for one thing. When Paul says, "yet not I but the Lord" he is highlighting the fact that he is repeating what Jesus taught as it is recorded in Matthew 5:31 – 32, 19:3 – 9, Mark 10:2 – 12 and Luke 16:18.

But what about those who had already separated? Paul says they must stay single or else get back together (verse 11). In other words, they must put right the mistake they have made or at least keep open the possibility of putting it right: they were still under obligation to keep the promise they had made and once you remarry there is no going back.

Even If You Are Married To An Unbeliever?

Verses 12 to 16 address a new situation which Jesus had not dealt with specifically and hence Paul's comment, "I, not the Lord, say." There were in all likelihood some in the Corinthian church who found

themselves married to unbelievers because they had been saved after they were already married¹ Surely it would be good if they separated from their partners? Again Paul says no, if the unbelieving partner is willing for the marriage to continue then it must continue and he gives reasons for that teaching.

First the unbelieving partner has been sanctified², or made holy, by the believer, and second, the children of the marriage are also made holy by the presence of the believer. In what way?

It is difficult to know exactly what this means. It cannot mean that the spouse and children of a believer are automatically saved. That idea is foreign to our understanding of salvation. It is possible that Paul's point is merely that the salvation of one person in the home has established a more godly atmosphere. But his intention seems to be to say more than that and his words are seen by some as intended to set aside concern and objections to his present argument which might come out of the section at the end of chapter six. In the light of what Paul said there some might be thinking, "Well if being joined to a prostitute defiles surely being 'joined' to an unbelieving wife or husband would too, so again separation is the best way." To that he says, "No, when you are married it is different because marriage is a relationship that is pleasing to God."

Two Lines Of Interpretation

There are two ways of reading verses 15 and 16.

The first says, well then if a believer's presence in the home is so beneficial, you would think that in those circumstances he or she should hold on to the marriage at all costs. But Paul says no, if the unbelieving partner in such a marriage wants to end the marriage, let him or her go.

"A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases."

1 Corinthians 7:15

The reason is that God wants his children to live in peace: not to be bickering and fighting to hold on to a partner who does not want to be held on to, and anyway there is no guarantee that the unbelieving partner will ever be saved.

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?"

1 Corinthians 7:16

The alternative view is that Paul is in fact strengthening his argument by adding two more reasons for staying around if your unbelieving partner agrees. An unbeliever may want to leave but God has called *us* to peace. In other words when God calls you your home should become a more harmonious place and now that you are a believer you should promote that and not do anything to provoke your unbelieving partner to leave. And (verse 16) you never know you might just see your partner saved.

This second approach is more consistent with what would have been practically possible because really if an unbeliever wanted to leave a marriage his or her Christian partner would have been powerless to stop it anyway, given the nature of divorce in those times (see below). But it does also change how we read the words, "A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases." They can no longer mean that a Christian is under no obligation to maintain a marriage with an unbeliever. They could mean that if his or her unbelieving partner walks out a Christian is then entirely free of his or her commitment to the marriage.

That Wasn't Too Painful — Was It?

This section of 1 Corinthians 7 is a passage that we are often nervous to approach because it addresses a subject that is a cause of a lot of controversy these days. Actually, with the exception of the bit about unbelievers being sanctified by believers, its teaching is relatively straightforward.

The difficulty comes when we try to apply it to situations that Paul probably did not have in mind when he wrote it. That is not to say that there are not principles here which we can apply to our questions about divorce and remarriage; there are. However, we must be cautious.

¹ This passage cannot be used to justify the marriage of a believer to an unbeliever as we are taught clearly that such a marriage is not even to be considered. See 7:39, Deuteronomy 7:3 and 2 Corinthians 6:14.

² The perfect tense is used which implies a condition established by a past event.

Remember Context

We must always remember to understand Scripture in context. That means not looking at verses in isolation but looking at them in relation to what precedes and follows them: looking at them in relation to the flow of thought of which they are a part. It also means looking at them in relation to the circumstances in which they were written.

Our aim should be to get into the mind of the writer and ask, why did he write this and what would his words have meant to the people who first read them. The danger we have to avoid is that of imposing a meaning on the passage that was never intended — unless of course God specifically tells us somewhere else that He intended it.³

Marriage and Divorce Roman Style

In applying this particular passage to our questions about divorce and remarriage we need to be careful not to impose our modern day thinking about these issues on it.

According to Roman law no legal formalities were necessary to validate a marriage. If a couple had the intention to stay together they were married. Divorce was just as easy and just as informal. Sometimes financial agreements were reached and papers were drawn up, but that was usually voluntary. A marriage ended when both partners agreed to go their separate ways or when one partner said he or she was finished with it. It was enough to leave home with the intention of not coming back and the effect was instantaneous. Either partner was free to remarry. As for the distinction we make between separation and divorce, well that just did not exist.

Add that to the grossly immoral climate of Corinth and you will realise that the believers who received Paul's letter must have grown up with a very low view of marriage indeed. What is more, the church at Corinth was relatively young, the gospels had not yet been written and so, for all these reasons, it is more than likely that their understanding of how a Christian should view marriage would have been rudimentary to say the least.

Those were the people Paul had in mind when he wrote his letter and that is the background that would have influenced their understanding of it. It all adds weight to the view that Paul's purpose was to refute the belief that it is better for Christians to stay away from marriage and sex altogether if they want to avoid immorality. You can easily understand how young believers in Corinth would come to think it.

Now Our Questions

Here are some of the questions we tend to bring with us when we turn to this passage, perhaps you can think of others.

- Do verses 10 and 11 rule out divorce in any circumstances for a Christian?
- Does verse 11 amount to a total ban on all remarriage after separation?
- Should a believer who is separated always seek reconciliation?
- Does verse 15 imply that a believer who has been abandoned by an unbelieving partner is free to remarry?

In the light of what we have learned, what do you think?

Next Week

Next week we will look at Jesus teaching on divorce. In preparation for that you could read and think about Matthew 5:31 – 32, 19:3 – 9, Mark 10:2 – 12 and Luke 16:18

³ I am thinking here, for example, of prophecies which the writer could not have understood the full meaning of. For those passages God makes clear what He wants us to understand by them from other parts of the Bible.