

1 Corinthians 7.10-16

Sex, Marriage, Singleness & the Glory of God Pt 3 – Divorce

April 30, 2017 – Spence Shelton

Good morning! Open your bibles if you have them to 1 Cor 7.10-16. I want to read the whole thing since its only 7 verses. Then talk through it.

[10] To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband [11] (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

[12] To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. [13] If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. [14] For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. [15] But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. [16] For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you

know, husband, whether you will save your wife? 1 Cor 7.10-16

Divorce is something that has, in some way, touched everyone right? While my parents stayed together, my best friend growing up had divorced parents. Sometimes we were at his moms, sometimes at his dads. Dad remarried pretty quick, mom never did. Because we were so close I got to know both families, went on vacations with them and being with one or the other was the normal rhythm of life for him.

I also watched a close friend go through divorce about 6 years ago. Again, I was a spectator not immediately involved but this more eye opening as an adult. I was there at his wedding where there were toasts, laughter, and celebration. Two years later, no toasts or celebrations. Just fights, tears, a sense of betrayal & pain so deep I can't describe it and unless you've been through it you can't either. No service, just papers & the heart breaking process of joint custody of their son. There is a grieving process that some who've been divorced say is worse than death. I think it is fair to say that the Church does not have the best track record when it comes to helping people deal with divorce. While we have an open process for helping people through the death of a loved one, the church is often viewed as silent or confused when it comes to helping people through the pain, grief, & confusion of divorce.

Now, if you are new with us and wondering what did I just walk into...let me slow your heart rate down a few beats. We are walking through a book of the bible called 1st Corinthians and our author is just responding to some questions he got from this young church in Corinth. This is the first ever “reply all” email. He’s answering real questions about real situations and he’s showing them that what they believe, the gospel, really does give answers to tough questions and it empowers them to walk even through difficult things like divorce. So, we aren’t just picking life’s most sensitive topics and talking about them. We are just walking through a letter.

So here’s the dilemma in front of me today. I want to be crystal clear about what God has to say about divorce and remarriage. That’s my job and that is the best thing you can hear today. Christians and non-Christians need clarity on the bible’s teaching on this all-important matter. At the same time I want you to hear the incredible healing & restoring power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. See I am first and foremost a preacher of the gospel. And the gospel is a true message of hope and love and redemption and I come to you as one who has failed to live up to the bible’s standards on a regular basis. And in my failures I have experienced the love and forgiveness of Christ time and again. So I stand in front of you not as a preacher of the law, but as a recipient of grace. And listen I know our church. Some of you have painful pasts or presents in this area. We have members of our church whose parents were divorced, some who are in struggling marriages, who’ve been

divorced, who’ve been remarried. Like I said, everyone in the room has been affected this. Last year there were just over 1 million divorces in America.¹ It is a reality in our day.

The reality of divorce was as real in Corinth as it is today. In fact most historians look at the Greco-Roman world and remark that, especially in the more urban areas, staying married ‘til death do you part’ was so uncommon marriage certificates were even worded with the expectation that they would end in divorce, not death.²

I think this is an especially important issue here in our church where, like Corinth, we have a lot of young couples and people considering marriage or young in their marriages. It’s pretty common for a couple to walk into marriage with starry eyes and some grey’s anatomy soundtrack playing in their heads as they begin their “happily ever after.” But real life just isn’t like that. In marriage sinners marry sinners and that means the relationship is inherently dysfunctional in some way or another. Be encouraged. And there will be times in your marriage where you will experience some feelings towards your spouse that are...less than happy. Let’s be real.

¹ <http://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr/resources/data/family-profiles/anderson-divorce-rate-us-geo-2015-fp-16-21.html>

² Ciampa, R. E., & Rosner, B. S. (2010). *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (p. 292). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Being married is great, but it is hard and there isn't a lot of training for it. It's about as easy to get a marriage license as it is a fishing license. I go to Wal-Mart, present my ID, pay \$30, and boom I am now certified to fish. To get married I go to the courthouse, pay \$50, show some ID and BOOM we are married. Does getting that license at Wal-Mart make me a bass master? NO. Nor does getting a marriage license make me an expert at marriage. But a lot of us walk into it without any clue how hard it really is to make it work.

That's a big reason divorce comes up so much. Many good, well-intentioned Christians believe that divorce isn't preferred, but there are a lot of questions swirling around it. Like under what circumstances does God allow for divorce? Surely, if God knew my husband..." So Paul takes the questions he received and answers them. He's helping a young church full of people trying to live out their new faith inside of the pressures of everyday life. And marital conflict was right at the top. So here we go. I'm going to walk through these verses slowly and hopefully extract the biblical principles in play and apply them to your questions about divorce. And God willing you will leave with your eyes and hearts lifted up that the God who raised Jesus from the dead can bring hope and life to even life's most difficult situations. And hopefully we as a church will be better equipped to love and care for those going through the difficulties surrounding divorce.

[10] To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord)...
Ok real quick that parentheses there, "(not I, but the

Lord)" ...I don't want that to throw you off. Is Paul saying the rest is not God's word but just his? Especially in verse 12 where he says I, but not the lord. This isn't an authority question for us. Scripture is scripture. Paul is just clarifying who said what. And both are in line with one another and I'll show you that soon.

...The wife should not separate from her husband

This word separate is the word for divorce. There was no distinction like we have in our modern day language.

Separate = divorce.³ Ok here's what he says next

[11] (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

Ok so in a couple of verses he's going to give an exception to this. And it's easy for us to focus our attention on the exception and miss Paul's big point. And his big point is this: **Divorce should not be an option for Christians.**

The best thing we can do for our understanding on divorce and remarriage is to start with a really clear understanding of what the bible teaches about marriage. See the reason divorce should not be an option is because the bible says marriage is a lifelong covenant.

³ Ciampa, R. E., & Rosner, B. S. (2010). *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (p. 292). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

This is the first thing we talk about in pre-marital mentoring with couples. We talk about the difference between viewing marriage as a contract and seeing it as a covenant. Now watch. Remember how we've been talking about gospel lenses?

Common view of the day – View marriage as a contract. So you and I enter into this contract with mutually agreed upon expectations. You promise to love me and meet my needs, make me happy, etc and I promise to do the same for you. Now because it's a contract, if at some point I feel you've not upheld your end of the deal, or if I want out of the deal, the contract is broken and I can walk away. God's view of marriage is through a different lens. God says marriage is a covenant. And the word covenant is the same word he uses to describe his relationship with his people throughout the bible. Genesis 17 God says to Abraham I will establish my covenant with you...I will be your God and you will be my people. It is a really big deal and is a very permanent thing. And here's the crux: it is a one-way commitment. Basically, no matter what you do, I'm going to uphold my end. God starts talking about marriage as a covenant

Malachi 2.14b – she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

I'm going to show you the rest of that verse in a minute but throughout God says you are to look at your marriage as the same type of permanent, one-way commitment that I

look at you with. So even when you let your end down, I'm still keeping mine. Hear that? HUGE difference than a contract view. And that is why Paul is saying Christian husbands and wives, even though they live in a divorce culture, shouldn't divorce. In fact, let me show you from scripture

3 reasons why divorce isn't an option for Christians

It breaks a covenant you made before God

See the first reason it shouldn't be an option is because of what marriage is. It is a covenant. And God takes covenant breaking extremely seriously. I told you I'd show you the rest of that section.

[13]... You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. [14] But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. [15] Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. [16] "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless." Malachi 2:13-16

See what he's saying? He's saying you wonder why I'm not answering your prayers? It's because you ACT religious with your prayers but by divorcing your wife you reject me in your actions. And your actions reveal your true beliefs. In fact different translations read verse 16 differently. Some of yours may read that God says "I HATE DIVORCE" which is a possible translation. Either way, God says breaking a **covenant** is something he does not respond well to. The big takeaway here is to see the weight of the commitment bound up in the marriage covenant. The commitment is not just to another person but also to God.

When Christians divorce it tells a lie about God's love

The fascinating thing about the way God designed humanity is that he designed us so that our relationships would reveal to us something about how we are to relate to him.

- Friendship here on earth – that is to tell us about Christ's friendship with us where he says John 15.35 – greater love has no one than someone who lays down his life for his friend. Earthly friendship was meant to teach us about heavenly friendship
- Parents here on earth – Teach us about God's fatherly love for us. So Luke 11.13 Jesus says if you earthly fathers, who are "evil" in comparison to how holy and good God is...if you give good gifts to your kids, how much more will the "heavenly father" give his spirit to those who asks. Parents were meant to teach us about God's love.

- This one goes both ways: If you have children or serve as a parent-like figure to a child or younger person, you experience emotions that are faint reflections of the fierce love of God our father.
- That's what makes Christian community so incredibly powerful and why we often talk about the church as God's demonstration community. Because through the lens of the gospel we see clearly what others cannot see. That is, that God has shown us how to love and function in these relationships and then when we do love as he loves...selflessly & unconditionally, the world sees something different.

And the most intense image he uses to describe his love for people is the marriage relationship. See he refers to Christ's relationship with us as that of a Groom with his bride.

The entire book of Hosea in the OT, which is the story of a husband loving & forgiving an unfaithful wife, God says, is a picture of his relationship with Israel. In Ephesians Paul famously tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church. For wives to submit to husbands as the church submits to Christ.

The primary purpose of your marriage was gospel reenactment. Where the covenant love of God is expressed and received from one another. Marriage isn't about your happiness; it's about God's holiness!

That's why divorce shouldn't be an option for Christians. **Because it tells a lie about God's covenant love for his people.** When his people let him down, God doesn't leave. When his people complain for decades, God doesn't leave. When his people cheat on him with other gods, he doesn't leave. Even when we rebel against him. When we mock and spit at him and put him on the cross...he never leaves. GOD NEVER LEAVES! – Some of you need to be the friend to say that to a friend in a struggling marriage right now. *"I know this is hard to hear, and I know you are hurting, but God never leaves you. And if you believe the gospel that he forgave you when you betrayed him, can we spend some time together praying for that forgiveness in your own heart?"*

Marriage was to be the place where the watching world would experience the self-sacrificing never ceasing never giving up love of Christ for you.

Divorce disrupts God's plans for shaping you and your family⁴

The greatest place where the love of God was supposed to do its work is within the immediate family. See God designed the family to be like a laboratory where his love could flourish in so many intangible ways. Children were supposed to experience the love, security, and stability of the love of God by seeing it in their parents.

⁴ A great point made by J.D. Greear in his message titled "Divorce and Remarriage" on this passage in the *Authentic Christianity* series.

When it comes to divorce there are those who say "well it will be better for our kids this way because we can't get along." I read a paper titled *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* that was not written by a Christian. It tracked children from divorce for over 25 years to investigate the claim that kids are sometimes better off if the parents split up. In every single category she looked at from education to socialization to emotional stability adults who experienced divorce in childhood were significantly more distressed than their peers who grew up in intact homes. Wallerstein concluded

"The call to liberalize divorce in the 1970s promised happier and better marriages. Ironically, findings from this study show that although divorce sets many adults free... these benefits do not extend to their children."⁵

Before I continue I recognize what I just said was very difficult for some of you to hear. And I want you to know the grace of God is bigger than your biggest mountain in life.

Not only was marriage supposed to form your children, but it was supposed to shape your spouse as well. Your spouse was supposed to experience the unconditional love of Christ from you. That's what Paul is getting at in vv 13-14:

[13] If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

⁵ *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A Twenty-Five-Year Landmark Study*, By Judith Wallerstein & Julia M Lewis published in *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 2004 Vol.21, No.3, 353-370.

[14] For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

This is a pretty astonishing comment. The reality in Corinth was that spouses were converting to Christianity. And ya'll, when that happens it drastically alters the relationship. Because all of the sudden your spouse isn't the person they once were. Still true today. Occasionally a couple will come to Christ together but its almost always one before the other. And Paul is saying the believing spouse now becomes God's instrument of grace in the life of the unbelieving spouse. This does not mean the spouse involuntarily becomes a Christian. Salvation comes by faith alone through grace alone. But, this "made holy" means they are set apart to hear the gospel, to see your prayer life and see the change God brings to your character. As you become more forgiving, more gentle, more patient... when they hurt you, and vengeance feels warranted, you choose love instead. Your spouse will say, "What has happened to you?" That forgiveness preaches the gospel in a way I never can from this stage.

I've heard people say, "God would want me to be with a believer!" And listen, I understand that sentiment. Marriage to an unbeliever is going to be hard in many ways and is less than ideal. But remember that covenant. Your marriage is about God and his holiness not you and your happiness.

And your greatest ministry of your life may be the way you display the gospel to your spouse.

[16] For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

Again you won't literally save them but...you may be the person God uses to bring your spouse to faith. There is a couple I know, Tommy & Joan. Tommy wasn't a believer and Joan was. Eventually Tommy got fed up with her faith and he left. For 20 years he left and went after other women. That whole time. 20 years. She prayed for him. **WHO DOES THAT! Gospel takes everything that is human logic and flips it on its head.** 20yrs later a heart attack made him come home. For 5 years he lived back at home with Joan and every Sunday she asked if he wanted to come to church and every Sunday he said no. For 5 years. That's 260 invitations to church! Then one easter he said yes. And God saved him that very day. He got baptized and at 70 years old he began following Christ. 20 years of prayer, 5 years of invites. And then God used his wife to bring him salvation.

One last thing: marriage isn't just for your spouse's spiritual formation, it's for yours! It changes you into the person God designed you to be as you begin to live a more others-centered life. You can't help but being faced with your selfishness in marriage right. What happens is you get thousands of small moments to die to self for the sake of your spouse. To watch their show, to eat tex-mex when you

wanted Italian, to buy a minivan instead of a SUV, to spend Christmas at the in-laws...IF you walk into each of those moments thinking “this is where I get to be Christ to my spouse” you begin to experience joy! Because, and this only makes sense through gospel lenses, there is more joy in modeling Christ’s selflessness than there is in pursuing self gratification.

For Paul, his simple straightforward calling is that two Christians who are both walking with God should never have a reason to divorce. One pastor taught me from this passage that most Christian couples considering divorce don’t fall out of love with one another, they fall out of repentance to one another. They begin to value freedom from a spouse more than obedience to Jesus Christ.

I spend all that time in these verses because calling couples that are struggling to fight for their marriage is Paul’s big point in this passage. With that established he then gives an exception in verse 15. Since we are talking about that, let me go ahead and show you the bible’s full answer to the question

Are there exceptions where it is OK to get out of a marriage?

Remember, marriage is a covenant not a contract. So we are talking about when irreversible damage is done to the covenant. I submit these humbly to you as the fruit of years of study in this.

1. **Death** – No scholars argue about this. If your spouse dies you are free to marry someone else. Now you may not kill your spouse. That is a violation of the 10 commandments. Just want us to be clear there.

The second exception is straight from Jesus. Remember Paul was referring to Jesus’ teaching as he wrote to **Mt19:9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”**

2. **Adultery**

Now remember, this is the only one Jesus gives. Which should illuminate the fact that ALL the other reasons we come up with aren’t legitimate for Christians. I’ve sat in my office multiple times to have a spouse say, “God wants me to be happy and I’m not happy.” Unhappiness, or irreconcilable differences, these are not grounds for Christians to divorce.

But does give adultery as an exception. He doesn’t elaborate as to why. We know from scripture that the covenant is most intimately expressed in physical union so when you take that and unify with someone else, it damages that covenant unlike anything else. That said it isn’t mandated, but allowed. And if you are in that situation I encourage you to talk with one of our elders.

That brings us to verse 15 of 1 Cor 7

[15] But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

Paul is giving the only other exception in scripture. And it is also very specific.

Abandonment by an unbelieving spouse

Like we said, as some became Christians their pagan spouses were confused & often easily upset by the whole thing. Paul is NOT giving the new Christian license to leave, we covered that. The Christian is to stay if the non-Christian will. BUT, if the non-believer divorces you, let it be so. You are free from them as God has called you to peace.

Common question: What if you are both believers and one leaves? Well, you need to let the elders of the church know. Because if a believer leaves, the job of the church is to call that person to repent. If they do not repent, the bible tells us to treat unrepentant sinners as unbelievers. So, even though your spouse would say he/she is a believer they are acting like an unbeliever and you would not be bound to them.

One more thing: What about abuse?

Listen, You and your children should NEVER be knowingly in harms way. God willing your spouse will seek help during a time apart and you can be reconciled. But you need to leave. However, it may come to the place where the abusive spouse is unrepentant and in such cases, they are to be treated as a non-believer. And at some point, with the consultation of your elders, you may together determine

abandonment has taken place and you follow previously stated protocol.

What if I am already divorced?

Some of you this is very recent or maybe you are in separation headed that way. Listen let me take you back to the gospel here. God loves you & he has forgiven your sin if you are in Christ. Gospel lens says how can I express that kind of love where I am now?

1. **Seek Reconciliation where possible:** If neither you, nor your spouse, are remarried then seek to honor God's covenant view of marriage and be together. Again verse 11 you should remain unmarried or be reconciled. Just because you seek it out doesn't mean your spouse will receive it. If they refuse to reconcile, best to let them leave. Live in peace. When can you remarry? Biblical wisdom seems to point towards when there is no possibility of reconciliation. That is, whenever your spouse dies or whenever they get remarried or if they consistently refuse to consider reconciling in such a way that they have, as Paul says here, "left." I would highly encourage you to let your elders help you walk through something like that.

2. **Repent where needed:** Listen, this won't necessarily change your situation. But if you sit and consider God's word, and you are convicted that maybe you were disobedient to God in that decision, you should repent. Maybe you need to send a note to your kids, to a former church, or to your ex and finally confess when you divorced

and remarried you were living, as Christ said in Mt 19.9, in adultery.

3. **Trust God & move on.** Paul is going to spend the next several verses telling the Corinthians to live as they are. If you or your spouse is remarried, it's settled. Move forward. One of you has a new covenant to uphold and the other is free to remarry. Listen some of you are in a second marriage and you may wonder, does God want me to get out of this and go back to first spouse or what? No. God calls you to honor him where you are now. We are imperfect people ok. God knows that. Now you are informed. You may need to seek forgiveness for past hurt, but God calls you to peace.

I know I've given you a lot today on a hard subject. I hope you hear a couple of things. First, some of you may be headed for divorce because Jesus is not your savior and is not in charge of your life. Your life is careening out of control and today you need to surrender your life to him. You need to own & admit you are lost without him. And he will begin to unfold the kind of healing miracles only he can do.

Others of you, believers, you need to come back to him. To his covenant with you. Trust the grace of God! He is enough. Let us help you find counseling and help you fight together. Let your community group help you. I know of a couple who sat in my office months ago thinking they were headed there. But the grace of God, the love of a community group,

the help of a counselor, and a fierce reminder of the grace of God.

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