

Sermon 23: 1 Corinthians 7:10-16: Answering Questions on Divorce

OUTLINE

Divorce and believers
Divorce and unbelievers

INTRODUCTION

As a bible college student and young pastor if you had to ask me what is the most difficult matter in theology, I would not have answer election; or the debate between infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism, but rather the bible's teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage. As a young pastor who would have to marry people who may have been divorced and counsel people who may be seeking a divorce I did not want to sin in how I dealt with this matter. For this reason I began to strategize to do a Master's degree planning on this very issue as my thesis. I began to read books and articles and sermons. I dropped my study because I came to what I believe is a biblical understanding of the matter, but let me say to you that this is one of the most difficult matters to study because of the variety of views and the massive amounts of material that has to be engaged with. So even today in Christian circles you have various views that differ with one another on these questions. Paul we know is busy answering questions put to him by the Corinthians. Their questions are more basic and particular than the questions we would be asking today. Paul you will remember is dealing with a large problem when it comes to ascetic views against the body and its functions. From places like Col. 2:20-23 and 1 Tim. 4:1-4 we see that these strong ideas of abstinence and being against marriage were a common problem of the time. These some of these young believers having come out of Greek philosophical contexts are struggling with some very basic questions like should married couples have relations; shouldn't all Christians be celibate? It seems that some were even considering divorce in order to remain pure, and others who were married to non-Christians were worried about how they could be holy while being married to an idolater and were thinking about divorce. Paul does not give us a comprehensive theology on the whole of the Bible's teaching on divorce, marriage and remarriage but he does apply the teaching of Christ in the gospels to help them with these basic questions. Our section of v10-16 will be divided up into two parts, v10-11 address those Christians married to Christians. And v12-16 addresses those Christians who are married to unbelievers.

Divorce and believers

V10-11, '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.' Firstly a comment about that word separate. That is the word for divorce. On this practice in the Greco-Roman world one scholar writes: 'To enact this divorce by separation, the owner of a house could simply tell his or her partner to leave, or the partner could move out the house. Neither needed to give the partner any warning, and neither had the power to prevent the divorce. There was no need to name any grounds for this divorce, though in a few cases the reasons have been documented. One person divorced a partner who became blind in one eye, and another said he was divorcing his wife because she had

become old and was not pretty any more.’¹ Paul begins by commanding or charging Christians not to divorce but to remain married. This is the basic take away as it applies to the questions that the Corinthians have been asking Paul. They were asking if I am married should I abstain from relations and Paul has answered, no. They have asked whether they should remain single, Paul has answered that not everyone has that gift. Christian couples are asking if they should divorce to remain pure, Paul says, no, you should remain married. And that is the end of the simple part of this section; the rest gets very involved as question after question arises. Here is the first and most important point of application that we must take away, marriage is for life, it is permanent, ‘What therefore God has joined together, let man not separate.’ Marriage is not a relation of convenience but permanence. Marriage is not an optional lifestyle choice that you can change like we do our hairstyles. Marriage is a God ordained institution that once entered into comes with a rulebook. Marriage is until death do us part. This covenantal aspect of marriage hems us in, and now we work on it. If you are married, that is a permanent and defining thing, it has all sorts of obligations for us to make it work. Your spouse should not feel trapped, or burdened by this arrangement you should be seeking to make marriage a happy place that they want to live in, not regret. You are bound to one another legally are you making efforts to make sure that there is the bond of friendship as well? Are you doing things together that you both enjoy that enhance the joy of your partnership? Are you making constant efforts to keep the relationship feeling fresh? Are you looking for new ways that you can make the other person feel loved? Don’t take the relationship for granted, all relationships need constant maintenance. A life-long marriage goes through many different stages and you will have to course correct as you go. There is marriage without kids; marriage with small children; marriage with teenagers, marriage where both partners are working; marriage with a stay-at-home mother; empty nest; becoming grandparents; marriage with infirmity. We need to meet each new stage with the same determination and eagerness as when we first got married. This might mean you have to reinvent major aspects of your marriage. You might have to do things that you hate, for example I went to dance lessons, to learn how to dance with my wife. Your marriage is like your house. You don’t move in and then let it fall apart around you. There is constant maintenance, there are improvement projects, there are extensions and demolitions, there are renovation and refreshment jobs, there are small additions like a hanging a new picture and radical overhauls.

You will notice that Paul says ‘Not I, but the Lord.’ Paul is saying to the Corinthians that he is drawing his answers from Christ’s teaching. Some think that therefore when he says ‘I not the Lord’ in v12 that v10-11 are authoritative but v12-16 are merely advice. No, Jesus did give some teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage in the gospels, but there were certain matters Christ did not address like what about marriage to an unbeliever. When Paul indicates that he is speaking not the Lord, it is still in his authoritative role as an apostle. But this matter of what Jesus did and did not address becomes very important as we seek to harmonize Paul’s teaching on these matters with what Jesus says. And this is where we begin to encounter the various differences among Christians views on these matters. There have been two basic schools of thought on divorce and remarriage. The first is the Classical view that has been the view of the Catholic Church and was the prevalent view up until the 1500s, that a Christian could divorce but never remarry anyone else, only reconcile with their

¹ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context*, 2002, p190

spouse. Marriage is a sacrament and is a permanent state that is not undone by divorce. Only widows can remarry not divorcees. Secondly, at the time of the reformation when the Reformers began to study the bible on these matters, we see some changes taking place, they said that a person can divorce legitimately on the grounds of adultery and desertion, and the innocent parties of the marriage alone are free to remarry. I reject the first view as incorrect, and hold an adjusted version of the Reformed view. I believe that there are more than two grounds for legitimate divorce.

This becomes important when we try to understand what the ESV has put in brackets for us, '(but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband).' We see two additions by Paul, to remain single or to reconcile. We can see where Paul got the teaching to not divorce from Jesus, it would come from His clear statements like Matt. 19:6, 'So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.' But Jesus never spoke about reconciliation; and He also did say you can divorce for sexual immorality. This leaves us with one of two choices. Firstly, is Paul taking all of Jesus teaching from the gospels and offering a summarized version of it? If so he is confirming the Catholic view when he says that the divorced person, for whatever reason must remain single and cannot remarry except to reconcile. Or secondly, is Paul only taking part of what Jesus taught and then adding some of his own thinking to the mix. This is my view and the view of the ESV which has very kindly put this statement in brackets indicating that Paul is adding something Jesus did not talk about. Many do not like this second view, but given the simple questions being put to Paul and the selective way he draws on Christ's teaching, I believe this makes the most sense.

Let us spend a little time thinking of Jesus teaching on this matter. One of the problems in dealing with Jesus teaching is that there are 3 gospels with slight variations. The first decision we need to make is to realize that Matthew's gospel has the most info, and we must interpret the more abbreviated accounts in light of the fuller accounts. Also Matthew as the so called gospel written to Jews expands on the matter to help us to see that Jesus is dealing with the problem of Jewish interpretations of the OT and speaks to correct them. Matt. 5:31-32, 'It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.' I can't take all the time we need to unpack this so let me throw at you all the important things that help put Jesus words into a proper context to understand them. Firstly, we have uncovered various versions of the divorce certificate and the wording on the divorce certificate always includes something like 'you are free to remarry.' So of first importance is the recognition that Jesus at least sanctions the use of the Jewish divorce certificate in certain instances which always had the words, 'you are free to remarry' in it. Secondly, this means that the words 'and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery' are not a universal statement addressing all remarriage situations but only the abuse that Jesus is addressing. Thirdly, a quick comment on how we are to understand the 'adultery' in the case of illegitimate remarriage. It must be taken in a moral but not a legal sense. In other words like the man who lusts after woman not his wife is guilty of moral adultery but not legal adultery, so that his wife does not have legal grounds to divorce him, but he has violated the seventh commandment. In the same way, those who divorce for illegitimate reasons in order to remarry commit the moral though not legal act of adultery. This needs to be stressed because someone

who does go and get divorced and remarried, they are not living in a state of legal adultery, they are guilty of violating the seventh commandment, but their second marriage is a full marriage, they must not abandon it to go back to their first marriage. Why do I venture down this path? Not to confuse you but to give you enough context so that as we consider Paul's words about remaining single we must see very clearly that Jesus did not forbid all remarriage, the Catholic view of marriage is not correct.

So why does Paul say stay single if he is not implying that all remarriage is wrong? We have shown that it is not because he is getting this teaching from Christ, because Christ allowed for the use of the Jewish marriage certificate in certain instances which did allow for remarriage. Since Paul does not even touch on any of Christ's teachings around legitimate divorce, we recognize that Paul stresses singleness for different reasons. And since we cannot draw that reason from Christ's teaching on divorce we must derive it from the context. 1 Cor. 7 is the longest chapter in the bible which addresses the matter of singleness and there are various reasons in the context for calling for singleness. Paul tells us it is better and an opportunity to serve the Lord. In v26 he talks about a 'present distress' which would make marriage more difficult. Though we must remember that Paul's call to singleness is not absolute but qualified by the reality of those who have the gift or not. It is a recommendation not a command.

Paul is not addressing the questions that we tend to ask around remarriage he is dealing with the present problem and questions at hand. In fact it was generally assumed that the majority of divorced people would remarry. In 18 B.C. a law was passed the Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus which permitted a private prosecution of any fertile woman who did not marry within 18 months of divorce and within 2 years of being widowed. 'Marrying-age celibates and young widows who would not marry were prohibited from receiving inheritances and from attending public games.'² I agree with those who say that the unmarried that Paul is addressing in v8 most likely includes divorcees. Paul had no word for divorcee and simply calls them unmarried. Those who want to take the statements of Christ and Paul and treat them as universal laws apart from their context will run into the same problems that you would run into if you universalized Christ's statements about oaths in Matt. 5:33-37.

But notice that he also says reconcile. Why does he say reconcile or be single; is he saying it is ok to simply divorce your wife as long as you remain single? No, it may be that there are those who have been divorced and already moved on and remarried, leaving them unable to reconcile. Reconciliation is a gospel driven principle. God was divided against us, we were His enemies, He pursues us and reconciled us to Himself through Christ. In these instances where marriages have broken down for all the wrong reasons reconciliation is a good thing. Are there times to not reconcile? Paul does not deal with every scenario we can put to him, but I think he would agree that there are some situations where we would not want to encourage a reconciliation. If there was a spouse who tried to poison you to death and they were in prison; if there was a case of serious physical abuse; or if a parent had sexually abused the children, etc. Generally speaking though, and not being sidelined by the exceptional and extreme cases, the gospel is all about fixing broken things and overcoming sin with grace. The same grace that forgives our sins teaches us to forgive others. The same gospel that

rehabilitates us and makes better people of us by the power of the Spirit also changes our spouses and can change them for the better. We believe that God's grace is stronger than our sin and able to improve us as sinners, there is hope for real change in broken relationships.

To bring it back to the simple bottom line in relation to the confusion at hand Paul is saying, marriage is good, stay married, marriage is not a temporary thing but permanent, Christians have a higher view of marriage than the impermanent versions of it prevalent at the time. He is saying that healing broken marriages is a good thing. Salvaging broken relationships is good, don't throw marriage away as if it were something cheap and move on to the next one, reconcile. The gospel can heal and fix broken things. He is saying being unmarried after a painful divorce is ok, singleness is not a curse but can be a state of usefulness to the Lord.

Unbelievers and divorce

V12-13, '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.' Paul changes the group he is speaking to and addresses a situation Christ did not address, the case of a believer married to an unbeliever. Believers were encouraged to marry believers only, but it could happen that one party of the marriage got saved and not the other. What then? This question would have been a critical one in the ancient world. Today if one partner in a marriage gets saved and the other doesn't, it would not bring the same difficulties that living in the ancient world would. You see your unbelieving partner would not merely be unbelieving but an idolater who actively practiced a false religion. And if you had even a basic knowledge of the OT where the Jews were not allowed to intermarry with the surrounding nations; and you were aware of Ezra 10:2-4, 'And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: "We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. ³ Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law. ⁴ Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it." Add to this Paul's statements, 1 Cor. 5:9, 'I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.' And then add to this false views of the body and defilement you can easily see how the unschooled could be confused and think that faithfulness to God included putting away the idolatrous spouse. Paul's teaching is clear, stay married. If they are willing to put up with you, you should not end the marriage. It is still a marriage in God's eyes, and all the usual duties of marriage still apply.

V14, '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.' Paul then motivates his reasons for why the marriage should not end. He tells the Christian spouse that the unbelieving spouse is made holy by the marriage. Now all admit that Paul is using the word holy in a unique way here, but Paul's argument is simple. Your unbelieving spouse, unlike in the OT, and unlike wrong ideas about defilement is not unclean but clean. Paul uses the word holy in a similar way when refuting ascetics in 1 Tim. 4:1-5, 'Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and

teachings of demons, ²through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, ³who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.' Paul's answer covers any OT thinking and any wrong philosophical notions of uncleanness or unholiness. Paul brings a second argument, if you had to get rid of yours unsaved spouse for being unholy, then like Ezra you would have to get rid of the kids too, but this is not the case. Paul is not making a case for infant baptism, but is refuting wrong ideas about what is clean or unclean.

V15, '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 goes back to the issues of divorce and remarriage and says that if the unbeliever insists on leaving, the believer is not enslaved by that marriage. Now it is not as if they could prevent it, there were not legal avenues to do so. Paul is helping the Christian see that they should accept what they cannot prevent and pursue peace not being difficult. Some have taken the phrase, 'not enslaved' to indicate a freedom to remarry, this might be part of what Paul means but the freedom to remarry is not dependent upon this phrase.

This issue of desertion by the unbeliever has led to some interesting developments in the breakdown of Christian marriages. Let's say we have a husband and a wife who are both Christians. Yet for no Biblical grounds the husband decides that he is going to divorce his wife. It is felt, that if he continues to push for the divorce, in spite of three visits by the Church elders. That he must be treated as an unbeliever through the process of church discipline, and the Christian wife may apply to herself the teaching of verse 15, that she is no longer bound, and for the sake of peace she can allow the divorce to go through, without feeling guilty that she is accepting the divorce. This scenario becomes appropriate for several types of marital breakdown between Christians, and calls for an active role to be played by the Church in the instance of putting out the sinning brother or sister. This means that Christians should never get divorced, and that those who do should be disciplined, and that pastors can remarry the innocent party without guilt. And perhaps even marry the guilty party after attempts at reconciliation have been made and repentance.

V16, 'For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?' Does Paul mean this verse optimistically or pessimistically? I am of the view that the Bible has an optimistic view of unbelieving spouses getting saved, 1 Pet. 3:1. If a husband or a wife gets saved, and they start to change their lives to do things God's ways, the unbelieving spouse will recognize that change for the better. They will see the honesty, the care, the love, the service, the selflessness, the forgiveness, etc. Their hearts which are made for God's truth will recognize the truth and God can use that to draw them to Himself. A great example of this was Monica the mother of Augustine. She prayed for years before her son converted and on his death bed her unsaved husband turned to Christ as well.

Here are the final applications of Paul's teachings as I see them.

Christians are not to divorce.

Those Christians that pursue divorce are liable for Church discipline.

Divorce ends marriage, as well as death, adultery and desertion. One is not in a perpetually married state.

Singleness is not a law but a recommendation.

Reconciliation should be sought in most situations.

The 'innocent' party of divorce is able to remarry in the Lord.

Those guilty of initiating and pursuing a divorce can be remarried by a pastor if they have attempted reconciliation. If reconciliation fails due to remarriage or refusal of the divorced spouse, then with repentance they may remarry a Christian.

Christian divorcees may only marry in the Lord.