

Sermon 24: 1 Corinthians 7:12-16: Answering Questions on Divorce: Part Two

OUTLINE

Marriage to an unbeliever
Divorce from an unbeliever
Staying married to an unbeliever

INTRODUCTION

Last week we began to look at Paul's teaching on divorce as he was answering specific questions put to him by the Corinthians. We saw that Paul did not uphold what we called the Catholic view of divorce, which is divorce with no possibility of remarriage. He referred the Corinthians to the teaching of Christ for his positive statements but we showed that he was only quoting part of what Jesus said in reference to what Jesus said, not giving a complete summary of what Jesus said. We observed that Christianity has a higher view of marriage than the surrounding culture that treats it lightly, that it promotes reconciliation and attempts to heal broken relationships with the power of the gospel. We also saw a high view of singleness removing the shame that is so often associated with it, and saw it as an opportunity to serve. Last week we dealt with Christians not divorcing Christians, today we move to the second part of Paul talking to the Corinthians where he addresses the questions about: what if I as a Christian am married to an unbeliever? Because of the concerns about not associating with idolatry; foreign ideas of asceticism that were producing a wrong view of the body and marital relations; fears of being contaminated by being married to someone who was not a Christian, Paul turns to these matters now.

Marriage to an unbeliever

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.

Before we deal with the matter of should a Christian divorce someone who is not a Christian let us deal with a more basic question should a Christian date or marry a non-Christian? The Bible has a continuous theme of the sin of being unequally yoked running through it. It universally condemns the marriage between someone who worships God and someone who does not in both the OT and the NT. Christians can only date and marry other Christians. In 1 Cor. 7:39 Paul says this, 'A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.' Here we see that a Christian widow who is allowed to remarry, is only allowed to marry a believer. Now widows are not a special category to whom only this law applies, this applies to all believers. There is nothing about widows or widowers that make them unique that they would be given restrictions that do not apply to Christians generally. Marrying a believer is not being put upon widows as a punishment for those who have already had a chance to be married. 1 Cor. 9:5, 'Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles

and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?’ In this verse Paul is defending his rights as an apostle which are being undermined in Corinth. And is discussing how he is willing to give up his rights in order to serve the churches. When he discusses his right to marry, which he has not done, he talks about having a believing wife. This is a deliberate inclusion that specifies the sort of wife he has a right to. The classic text quoted is 2 Cor. 6:14, ‘Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?’ Now in the context Paul is not talking about marriage or dating, he is talking about being united with false apostles, or going into idol temples with unbelievers. However, the principle of what he is saying has application to many areas of union including dating and marriage. Yoking an animal of one species with another was a practice forbidden in the OT, Deut. 22:10, ‘You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.’ Paul recognizing that this law of God was not merely an arbitrary law but based on the principle of separation in much of the OT law applies the kernel within that law in the NT. This has implications for all sorts of relationships between believers and unbelievers including dating and marriage. The notion of being unequally yoked with unbelievers is not part of the Mosaic law which falls away in the NT.

The OT illustrates and teaches that unequal yoking is wrong and detrimental. Some think the reason for the flood was because the ungodly daughters of men mixed with the godly line, the sons of God, and corrupted them provoking God to send the flood, Gen. 6:1-7. When Abraham chooses a wife for Isaac, he makes sure that it was not someone from the ungodly Canaanites, Gen. 24:1-3. We see that Isaac’s son Esau is described as marrying a Hittite and how this was bitter for his parents, Gen. 26:34. Isaac also instructed Jacob not to take a wife from the Canaanites. All of these instances predated the Mosaic Law showing it as a universal principle not merely a ceremonial law. This practice of remaining separate under Mosaic Law was not an issue of racism but religion, Deut. 7:3-4, ‘You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, 4 for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.’ God warned off the Israelites from intermarriage because the inevitable effect is that pure religion is lost and idolatry creeps in. God is not against races marrying.

The most classic example is the example of Solomon, the wisest man in the world. How do you get the wisest man in the world to stumble? One of the ways Solomon fell was through marrying the wrong person. It began early in his reign where for pragmatic reasons he married the daughter of Pharaoh to make Israel secure, 1 Kings 3:1, ‘Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt. He took Pharaoh’s daughter and brought her into the city of David until he had finished building his own house and the house of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem.’ God’s instructions to his people is very clear, do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers, Ex. 34:12-16, ‘Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst.¹³ You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim¹⁴ (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God),¹⁵ lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice,¹⁶ and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.’ This matter of being unequally yoked has

been a conversation I have had numerous times and every time I have it, the person, both men and women, insist that they are strong enough, that they might very well be used of God to convert the unbeliever. Solomon is a very blatant warning about what usually happens, 11:1-8, 'Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women,² from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love.³ He had 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart.⁴ For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father.⁵ For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites.⁶ So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done.⁷ Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem.⁸ And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods.'

1 Cor. 15:33, 'Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."' One day a lady came to Spurgeon about a male friend who was an unbeliever and she spoke about how confident she was about God using her to save him. Spurgeon stood on a chair and asked which is easier, for him to pull her up or her to pull him down? Solomon was the wisest man on the earth; do you think you are wiser than him? This wrong choice early on in his life set the course for the rest of his life. But what if you did marry an unbeliever, are you married? Yes, marriage is a creation ordinance, in other words something that people can do in all parts of the world, not only in church. Your marriage is a real marriage before God bound by all the same duties and responsibilities of a Christian marriage.

Divorce from an unbeliever

Lets come back to the question Paul is addressing. 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.'" Ezra and the people felt that in order to avoid another exile they should end those wrong marriages lest they have a repeat of the exile. 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. The fact that the word unclean is contrasted with holy is the give away as to what Paul is meaning by the word holy. 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 your 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. There are some who have tried to prove that Paul believed in the whole family being part of the New Covenant, making the children covenant children and therefore proper candidates for baptism. I hope you can see that Paul is not speaking about baptism, nor is he implying that an unsaved spouse should be treated as part of the visible church, he is showing why unsaved spouses are not unclean and should not be divorced. The statement about children is a secondary argument to prove this point. He is saying, that if you have to divorce your husband who is not a Christian because you are somehow defiled; then you would have to get rid of the kids too, which is absurd. Technically this is a part of an *ad absurdum* argument.

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. If he were a member of this church. It is felt, that if he continues to push for the divorce, in spite having the steps of church discipline applied to him in Matt. 18. 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 sinfully pursue it should be disciplined, and that pastors can remarry the innocent party without guilt. And maybe after very careful consideration, once attempted reconciliation has failed due to remarriage of the injured party; after

clear signs of repentance; perhaps a pastor could even remarry the guilty party. I had to tell a man that I could not participate in his third marriage, but I could foresee some situations where a possible remarriage could occur, even for the guilty party.

Staying married to an unbeliever

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. 3:12, 'Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, ²when they see your respectful and pure conduct.' 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. If a husband who was once thoughtless and selfish and demanding and angry all the time gets saved. and now that he sees that the husband is to love his wife as Christ did the church and he begins to be kind, and attentive; if he takes the lead for the good of his family not merely bossing everyone around for his own comfort; if he starts showing patterns of positive behavior where he puts away swearing and drinking; if he shows a willingness to forgive and not bear grudges refusing to talk to other members of the family; if he starts taking an interest in his wife's needs, the home, the children in ways he did not before, an unbelieving wife will notice. And maybe God will use that as part of what He uses to convert that unsaved wife. There is no guarantee, but a spouse has the best perspective to see a change in someone's life. Likewise if a once self-absorbed wife who was fixated on the things of this world, who was competing with her peers, who was angry at the kids for not fulfilling her selfish expectations, who used to run her husband down verbally, who disrespected him in public. If she experiences salvation and is changed. If she starts to respect her husband; support him; if she changes the tone of her speech to being gentle and not contentious; if she raises her disagreements and concerns in a way that does not humiliate; if she creates a positive home environment, is affectionate and warm, an unsaved husband will notice. A Christian spouse has such an advantage in these situations. We have been saved by an amazing grace. We who were unworthy; who deserved nothing but judgment were saved by God. He had every right to reject and punish us but instead He pursued us; He did not treat us as our sins deserved; He took the punishment and the consequences for our sins upon Himself; He bore the pain of what we caused; He saved us by His grace pushing towards those who were pushing Him away, relentless in His loving pursuit and putting up with all the lovelessness we gave in response. Freely we have received and now freely we must give. Every Christian married to an unsaved partner is equipped to love the unlovable because they were loved when they were unlovable; they have the Spirit producing this fruit of love within them; they have access to God's throne for all the help they need to do His will. If we model the grace that saved us and live out the wisdom of God's laws for what we are to be as godly men and women, God can use these truths to confront an unbeliever and 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.

I can imagine that this will not be without challenges, Jesus promises that those who follow Him will experience a sword in their families, where even husband and wife can be on opposite sides of the fence. We live in an age where everything is polarized where as a result of getting saved the saved spouse will suddenly have a change on their political views, their view of morality, and other things that their lifestyles have been built upon. The Christian must remember to model gentleness and patience to those who disagree; to as far as it depends upon them obey God and keep the peace; the saved spouse should make sure they are plugged into a church where they will be well taught and have a good support structure to advise and pray for them; and most importantly they should pray. They should pray recognizing that God can use them to bring their unsaved spouse to a saving knowledge of Jesus.

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

Christians can only date and marry Christians.

Christians are not to divorce.

Christians that are married to unbelievers are just as married and can be used by God to save them.

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.