

# DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

## 1 CORINTHIANS 7:10-16

I want to start with some good news and bad news.

*First, the good news...* Today, the divorce rate in America is the lowest it's been since the 1980s.

*Now, the bad news...* divorces have declined because 20-somethings aren't getting married. "Millennials" are either avoiding or delaying marriage. Divorce rates have decreased, because there aren't as many marriages.

Today, barely half of Americans are married.

The children of baby-boomers have seen the ravaging effects of divorce up-close and personal. Many have experienced the damaging impact firsthand. They've been wounded and scarred by their parents' divorce.

They're now scared that they'll duplicate the tragedy.

Surveys show most millennials still aspire to marriage in their future, but their reluctance to get married right now reveals their fears and insecurities. They worry about whether they can succeed at marriage.

Recently, Kathy and I celebrated our 35th anniversary.

Kathy posted the achievement on Facebook. And we received tons of congratulations. But one of the comments stood out... It was brief, but made me think...

My daughter wrote, "Thanks for making it look easy."

When I read Natalie's post my first reaction was, "*We must've fought quieter than I thought or she's a sound sleeper.*" One thing is for sure, "*It hasn't been easy!*"

Kathy and I have had our share of ups and downs, but we've stuck it out. At times we *made* our marriage work.

When you reach the end of your rope, you tie a big knot, and hang on until God comes to the rescue... and He always has in our marriage! I think our kids and their spouses have seen in us that there's no such thing as a perfect marriage, but by God's grace marriage is doable.

In 1 Corinthians 6-16 Paul is answering questions he was asked in a previous correspondence. In Chapter 7 he tackles questions concerning personal relationships - singleness, marriage, *and now divorce...*

Remember, the city of Corinth was a decadent town.

Lust was integral to their religion. Corinth was known for its temple to Aphrodite, the fertility goddess. Vice, and sex, and prostitution were part of Corinth's worship. The Christians in this city were refugees of a moral disaster.

In 6:9 Paul lists "*fornicators, adulterers, homosexuals, sodomites...*" Then he says, "**And such were some of you, but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.**" But what a marvelous statement, "*And such were some of you...*" *They'd been changed.*

The Corinthians were now recipients of God's grace. They were *new* people - radically transformed by Jesus.

*In this church...* There were repentant adulterers trying to reconcile with their spouse... people with same sex attraction

were forging a new identity, and learning to embrace the gender God assigned them... singles who formerly had casual sex were now treating each other with a new respect and learning self-control...

The Christians in Corinth were scarred and wounded. Their life was messy. They all carried some baggage.

Righteous relationships were a new concept. That's why on the learning curve they were at ground level.

As a pastor, who's counseled countless couples over the years, one of the big lessons I've learned is that sin complicates. It twists lives and relationships, and creates situations that are tough to navigate and unravel.

*The easiest path is always the straight and narrow.*

Sin contorts us in ways we were never meant to bend. The Corinthians were now committed to Jesus. They wanted to live by God's wisdom - especially in their most intimate relationships - but they didn't know how. Paul provides them important guidance in 1 Corinthians 7.

Remember too, in Chapter 6 the Corinthians were ruining their witness. Church members were taking each other to court. Acting no better than the pagans in town.

This was also the issue when it came to marriage and divorce. *How can Christians talk authentically of the love and unity there is in Christ, if they can't stay married?*

**And this is a major issue for Christians today!**

This past June the United States Supreme Court ruled that the fifty states could no longer outlaw same-sex marriage... Evangelical Christians were up in arms!

*This was an attack on biblical marriage! What is going to happen to the institution of marriage in our country?*

But I'll never forget my wife's reaction. "Why are we worried about a few homosexuals getting married, when over 30% of evangelical Christians end up divorced."

According to George Barna, a Christian pollster, the divorce rate is actually higher among folks claiming to be born-again Christians than among people who identify themselves as agnostics or atheists. *That's shameful!*

I'm not belittling the impact of the Supreme Court's decision on the sanctity of marriage - *but it's largely symbolic*. The real damage to the institution of marriage is being done by Christians and churches who are *flippant about commitment and too tolerant of divorce*.

According to Christianity Today only 22% of Americans believe that divorce is a sin. And of evangelical protestants the number is only 34%. How can we say that, when the Bible tells us, "God hates divorce?"

How can we tell the world that Jesus has the power to reconcile people to God and to each other, if married Christians don't have the wherewithal to stick together?

If there's forgiveness in Christ, why can't we forgive?

If there's power in the Spirit, why can't we endure?

If there's unity in Jesus' name, why not work through our problems, rather than simply calling it quits?

These are questions we all should ponder...

Did you hear about the woman who'd been married to four men... Her first husband was a **millionaire**. Her second was a **film producer**. Her third hubby was a **butler**. And her fourth husband, a **funeral director**.

*A millionaire, a film maker, a butler, a mortician...*

Of course, the gal had a perfectly good explanation for her choices in men. She said. "One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and four to go."

Well, believe it or not, that could be a good lead-in to verses 10-16. For here Paul addresses married people who find themselves in four different situations...

**Verse 10** speaks to folks who are married.

**Verse 11** to married people who are separated.

**Verses 12-14** are directed to the believer who is married to an unbeliever that wants to remain married.

And **verse 15** is to a believer in Christ whose spouse refuses to stay married and departs the relationship.

In verse 10 Paul embarks on this thorny subject of divorce. "Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from *her* husband."

Here is the Divine ideal. God's blueprint for marriage is one man and one woman in a lifelong relationship.

Notice, Paul frames this as a *command*, not a suggestion... And it's *from the Lord* Himself, not just Paul... Neither spouse is to abandon their marriage!

Malachi 2:16, the verse I referred to earlier, clarifies once and for all, God's attitude toward divorce, "The Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce." That's definitely the same sentiment Paul echoes here...

God knows the pain and damage caused by divorce.

People who get divorced think of it as a single sniper's shot. It's only going to impact one person...

In reality it's a pipe bomb blast - it bruises and rips apart everyone in its vicinity - kids, families, churches, society at large. This is one reason God hates it so...

Recently, pop singer, Jewel, split with her husband of six years. She referred to their divorce as a "tender undoing." She felt stifled and needed to grow again.

Well, I'm sorry but that's not how God refers to divorce. In His eyes there is nothing *tender* about it.

Malachi 2 goes on to say of divorce, "for it covers one's garment with violence." God sees divorce as a violent act. The word Malachi translates "divorce" implies an amputation. The root means "a cutting off."

Author CS Lewis said this about divorce, "Christians all regard divorce as something like cutting up a living body, as a kind of surgical operation. Some think that the operation is so violent that it cannot be done at all; others admit that it is a desperate remedy in extreme cases. They are all agreed that it is more like having your legs cut off than it is like dissolving a business partnership..." This too is a reason God hates divorce.

And this is why Paul writes in verse 11, “But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.” Here the word translated “depart” means “to put room between.” *Create some space.*

Ordinarily, a married couple should live together, share a home together, participate in life together.

But there might be occasions when a husband or wife needs a little breathing room... Tensions are high. The environment has become toxic. The shouting and tempers of both spouses are unsafe for the children.

And a temporary separation is what's called for...

But when a married couple separates, it should be for one reason - to regroup for a shot at reconciliation.

In Matthew 19 Jesus said if a person divorces their spouse on unbiblical grounds, and marries another person they've committed adultery. Actually, two sins are involved - *the divorce then the adultery*. Here Paul says, if you separate don't compound the problem by hooking up with someone and committing adultery.

Either remain alone, or be reconciled to your spouse.

If you separate from your spouse it's NOT *to plan an exit strategy, or explore other possibilities, or think of excuses to quit* - or God forbid, *date other people*. It's temporary, and only for re-starting the marriage.

One Sunday morning, a church member was celebrating he and his wife's 50th wedding anniversary.

The pastor invited Joe onto the platform, “*Joe, what’s the key to such a long marriage?*” Joe answered, “Well, my wife and I like to travel. We’ve traveled the world.”

The pastor asked Joe for an example. “*Where did you take your wife on your 25th anniversary?*” Joe replied, “We went to Beijing, China. It was a wonderful trip.”

The congregation ooo-ed and ahh-ed. The pastor asked him again, “*Where are you going for your 50th anniversary?*” Joe answered, “Back to Beijing to get her.”

This is not the kind of separation Paul is considering. Maybe some room to breathe, but not a virtual divorce.

It reminds me of a famous quote by Ruth Graham, wife of Evangelist Billy. Ruth was asked *if she ever considered divorce?* She answered, “**Divorce? No. Murder? Yes.**” Divorce should never be on the table.

I’ll never forget counseling a couple one time who were always threatening each other with the “D” word.

I told them they’d never have a committed marriage if they kept putting its permanence on the chopping block. They needed another way to threaten each other, *but not divorce...* Likewise, some of you need to agree once and for all you’re going to stay married.

In the darkest days of WW2, Churchill reminded the British people, “**Wars are not won by evacuation.**” And neither are good marriages. A temporary separation to regroup is okay, but either *remain alone or be reconciled.*

Understand, if you divorce your spouse for *a reason that’s not recognized biblically* God considers it a sin.

Verse 12, “But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.”

First, don't trip up over Paul's phraseology. Several times in this chapter Paul sounds as if he's qualifying or downgrading his counsel from **divine inspiration** to **human opinion**. *That is not what the Apostle means.*

If what Paul penned wasn't inspired by the Holy Spirit it wouldn't be in the pages of sacred Scripture.

Generally speaking, Paul's writings ran parallel to the teachings of Jesus. But there were some subjects that Paul addressed that Jesus did not deal with directly.

And here's an example. Jesus couldn't comment on believers married to unbelievers, because for most of His ministry **no one** was what we would call a believer.

Even His own disciples didn't truly believe until after His resurrection. Jesus lacked opportunity to speak on this subject. Paul couldn't write, “**Thus says the Lord.**”

Yet the Corinthians desperately needed godly wisdom on these matters. So, through the process of biblical inspiration God provided the Corinthians the counsel they needed through the pen of Paul.

And here's Paul's instructions to the Corinthians...

If you're a believer in Jesus, and you're married to an unbeliever - just because your unbelieving spouse rejects the

Lord, doesn't give you the right to reject them. If he or she wants to stay married - stay married!

*Will it be difficult? Yes. Problematic? I'm sure. Lonely at times? Even frustrating?* More than you realize.

But if your unbelieving spouse wants to stay married, then by all means, continue to love your spouse.

Of course, you might be thinking, how did this happen in the first place? 2 Corinthians 6 teaches that a believer in Jesus should never marry an unbeliever.

2 Corinthians 6:14 uses the picture of a yoke.

*Not that yoke*, but a harness that connected two oxen behind a plow. A farmer's yoke was constructed to force the animals to work together. The yoke choked the animal who pulled ahead, and pinched the one who lagged behind. The yoke made them work together.

That's why, it was easier on the animals to yoke two of the same breed. Mix a donkey with an ox, and you insure friction and frustration. Different species have different natures that pull apart and fight each other.

And likewise, a believer and unbeliever are separate species - different breeds with different natures.

A believer is born of God - alive to the things of the Spirit. Whereas the unbeliever - *even if he's a nice guy* - he's still dead in sin, and unaware of the Spirit.

Put these two breeds in the same yoke - *a marriage, a business, a roommate situation, a serious dating relationship* - and it'll produce conflict and frustration.

At first, the two parties might work well together, but over time they'll inevitably move in separate directions. They'll pinch or choke the other. The yoke causes pain.

There's an old Puritan proverb that puts it, "If you're a child of God, and you marry a child of the devil you're going to have problems with your father-in-law."

And let me ask, *what would be the best way to avoid marrying an unbeliever?* How about **not dating him!**

I heard of a sign at the start of the Alaskan Highway. It reads, "Choose your rut carefully, you will be in it for the next 200 miles." And it's the same with marriage.

If you're single be careful who you marry! Christian marriage is until death do you part, *whether it makes you happy all the time or not*. Any two people are going to have their share of differences, so why ignore *the main difference* - the very thing that makes you tick...

If you're a Christian married to a non-Christian, you have a huge treasure you won't be able to share with your spouse. There'll be a disconnect. It just won't click. *Why invite that kind of conflict from the start?*

Yet here was the phenomena that had happened in both Corinth, and in all the other first century cities...

Many of the initial Christians were married before they heard the Gospel - some couples for many years.

Someone preached the good news, a spouse embraced Christ - he or she went from darkness to light - their life radically changed - *but not their spouse*.

All of a sudden this unbeliever realizes they're married to a

different person - *because they are!* This happened to many a marriage in the first century.

Christianity became a wedge between husbands and wives. It was often a source of division, not just unity.

And Jesus foresaw that this would happen. He said in Matthew 10:34, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.’ He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.”

If faced with the choice of obeying Jesus, or appeasing your unsaved spouse, you have to remain loyal to Jesus. *But anything short of that*, and God calls the believer to bend over backwards for the unbeliever.

1 Peter 3 says the goal should be to win them without a word - *with your love, integrity, good conduct.*

*And here's why the believing spouse should remain married to their spouse.* Verse 14, “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.”

Understand, what Paul is NOT saying... He’s not teaching that the unbelieving spouse, or their kids, get to heaven on the believer’s coattails. That’s not how salvation works. No

one gets saved by association.

Here he says the unbeliever is *sanctified* by the believer. The words "*sanctified*" and "*holy*" are from the same Greek word "*hagios*," which means "to set apart."

The word speaks of position and opportunity.

Paul is saying when a believer remains married to an unbeliever the light of God continues to shine into the dark life of the unbeliever, and into the lives of the kids.

Christian *witness and wisdom* remains a constant influence. The Christian in the family makes up for the unbeliever's lack of insight and affords spiritual safety.

In the end the Christian's presence greatly enhances the likelihood of their spouse and children getting saved and knowing the Lord. A believer can play a huge role even if their spouse isn't on the same page.

Of course, the marriage between a believer and an unbeliever will be tough... *She wants to go to church. He doesn't... He feels led to give financially. She says not with her money...* She stops drinking with him, he stops hanging with her... They pull against each other.

If you're a believer wed to an unbeliever, marriage is like a three-legged race. Think of a 6'2" father tied to a 4'6" child. It's hilarious to watch such a mismatched combination run... unless you're doing the running and it's painful. The two of them will stumble all the way.

But this is what *everyday* looks like for a believer married to an unbeliever. They're a mismatched couple. Imagine, being

attached to a person of *uneven stature* and *unequal stamina*. Life won't be easy...

Yet if living this life means the eternal salvation of your spouse and family, then it's certainly worth it!

For some of you this is what you deal with daily. Your spouse hassled you for coming to church this morning. But let me encourage you to stick with it! God will give you grace and strength to endure. *Lean on Him!*

In fact, before Paul closes this section he challenges his readers one more time to consider their vital role...

Jump down, verse 16, "For 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?"

The possibility of their salvation is worth your effort.

But what if you're a believer married to an unbeliever who doesn't want to run the three-legged race?

Verse 15 tells us, "But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace."

If the unbeliever abandons you... *not because you ran him off with your nagging... or you acted like a jerk so she'd leave... but because of your faith; then you're "not under bondage."* A Christian isn't bound to a spouse, who doesn't want to remain bound to them.

If the unbeliever splits, the believer doesn't have to wait forever. He or she is free to move on with their life.

And so, let me summarize the Bible's teaching on divorce...

**there are only two situations where God permits someone to divorce and remarry.**

And let me first say what those two exceptions are **NOT**... *In-law problems, income problems, incompatibility problems, insensitivity problems, intimacy problems are not justifications for divorce.*

The Bible only condones divorce in two cases...

The first is found in Matthew 19:9. Jesus told us, "Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery..."

Here's an exception: "**sexual immorality.**" The Greek term is "**pornea.**" It includes all illicit sexual activity: *premarital sex, homosexuality, adultery, porn, etc.*

If a husband or wife engages in **perpetual sexual misconduct** the spouse is free to divorce and remarry.

Understand though, this isn't a command. The victim can choose to forgive the guilty party, and restore the marriage - *and I've seen this happen.* It's beautiful.

It's a demonstration of God's amazing grace, but in no one's case is it mandatory. The offended spouse has every right to divorce their spouse and move on.

In fact, in the Old Testament an adulterer would be stoned to death. This made the victim of their sin a widow or widower, and thus free to remarry. In the New Testament Jesus shows mercy on the adulterer, but still affords the victim the same freedom to start over.

The second scenario where God permits divorce and

remarriage is what we've looked at today.

1 Corinthians 7:15, *“But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.”* The second biblical justification for divorce is **desertion**.

If you're deserted by a spouse because of your faith in Jesus - and righteous conduct - then you have the prerogative to move on and remarry in the will of God.

But again, be careful how you define **“desertion.”**

A husband who ignores his wife during football season, and spends too much time with his remote control is guilty of insensitivity, but not desertion.

A wife who spends too much money at the mall may be disrespectful, but she hasn't departed the marriage.

Desertion is to behave in a way that indicates you don't want to be in the marriage any longer. If an unbelieving spouse departs the marriage; then God doesn't require the believer to stay celibate the rest of his or her life. The believer can move on and remarry.

Certainly, it's desertion if the unbeliever packs up, moves out, takes the dog, leaves a forwarding address, and files for divorce... That's easy to identify.

*But are there more egregious betrayals that count as desertion? It's my opinion, but I believe there are...*

A husband who physically abuses his wife or kids is saying he no longer wants to be in a marriage. He may not have left physically, but his heart has checked out.

A wife who's addicted to drugs, neglects her family, refuses to get help - *has she departed her family?* Her emotional desertion may be worse than leaving town.

There're people who come home every night. They like a meal. They enjoy sleeping under a dry roof, *but that doesn't mean they haven't bailed on their family.*

After pastoring 35 years I've concluded it's possible for a spouse to desert a marriage without actually vacating the premises and filing the divorce papers.

I want to mention one more scenario. Paul doesn't bring it up in our text, but it's relevant to this topic.

*What if you did divorce your spouse on unbiblical grounds?* There was no sexual immorality. Your spouse wanted to be married. It was you who pressed the issue. *You felt stifled. You got irritated. You weren't happy. You got bored and wanted to spice up your life.*

In looking back on it now you realize you didn't have a biblical basis, and the choice you made was a sin.

You've now remarried, and according to Jesus you and your spouse have committed adultery. *What now?*

*Here's what you do...* you treat divorce and adultery like every other sin. You don't ignore it, or hide it, or rename it - you confess it, and ask God to forgive you.

If you do, the Bible promises, **"He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."** Jesus will forgive you fully and freely. *Old things pass away, all things become new.*

Remember the woman caught in adultery - in the very act.

Jesus refused to bring condemnation. He loved her, and forgave her, and offered her a new start.

**“Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.”**

And that’s what he says to us!

*Does that mean you can marry again?* I believe it does. My Bible tells me what God forgives, He forgets.

The people of Jerusalem had gone to bed with idols - with false gods. They’d committed spiritual adultery.

But in Jeremiah 31:21 God refers to His pardoned people as **“O virgin of Israel.”** *How’s that for cleansing one’s sin?* God gave His people a brand new start!

If your divorce is recent. If neither you or your ex have remarried, and you can repair the damage you’ve done, then a repentant heart will try to reconcile.

But if some time has elapsed, and if for whatever reason reconciliation is now out of the question - *then can **you** start over? Can you begin again? Even remarry?...* I believe in grace, that’s why I believe you can. It’s not because what you’ve done isn’t serious, it’s because God’s grace is full, and free, and final.

But here’s what you can’t do... **You can’t remarry if you’re still trying to justify an unbiblical divorce.**

You’re free to start over only after you’ve admitted and learned from the mistakes you’ve made. Here’s how I put it, you can’t start a new sentence until you first put down a period. So many people live life like a run-on sentence. They go from spouse to spouse, and marriage to marriage, without ever admitting their sin.

God doesn't want you to embark on a new marriage if you haven't learned to see the old marriage from His perspective. If you were divorced on unbiblical grounds admit it, change your attitude, vow not to do it again.

And if you're marrying someone who's been divorced make sure they're not carrying over into the new marriage ungodly attitudes from a previous marriage.

If they divorced *a former spouse* un-biblically what makes you think they won't do it to *a future spouse*?

Many years ago, as a very young pastor, I was approached by a couple who both had been divorced from previous spouses, and now wanted to remarry. I didn't know what to do - what stand to take.

I called a local Baptist pastor who I respected highly. We had attended his church. I asked him for advice.

He told me early in his ministry he'd decided not to marry divorcees under any circumstance. Then he said, "**It was the worst decision I made in my ministry.**"

He explained, "**I wish now I'd taken each case individually, and helped folks apply God's grace to their situation.**" I thought, "**Wow, that's what I want to do.**"

I read this past week that 42 million Americans have been married more than once. I would imagine, a few of those 42 million are here today. I don't want to *condemn you*, but I do what to *challenge you*.

In Christ there's forgiveness, and freedom, and fresh starts - but they're always preceded by repentance.

Don't keep carrying over a sinful attitude from relationship to relationship - put down a period on the past. Come out of this world, and have the courage to see life, even your past choices, in light of God's Word.

It's the truth that sets us free!

Perhaps you're in a marriage that you've always wondered if it was right. A black cloud hangs overhead.

Today, you can make it right. Your marriage might've started in sin, but it doesn't have to continue in sin.

Ask for God's forgiveness. Despite the events that launched your marriage, dedicate it now to Him. Let God sanctify it, and make it a testimony of His grace.

If you're married, stay married.

If you're separated, seek to reconcile.

If you're married to an unbeliever pray for their soul and be a good spouse... And if you're free to remarry either through your former spouse's actions, or God's forgiveness, then make good decisions going forward.

Let's all view marriage in ways that glorify God!