

1 Corinthians 7:10-16

Intro

I suspect most of us have some experience with divorce. Many of you will have friends or family who have gone through it. Some of you have gone through it personally. And still others might be fearful that could happen to you one day in the future.

Most of us have some experience with divorce because it's quite common in Australia.

Around 1 in 3 Aussie marriages end in divorce.

It's common, but from my observation, divorce is never pleasant or easy. It may be necessary in some instances, but never pleasant or easy. Last week we thought about the idea of marriage as a "one flesh" relationship. Where two become one. When a marriage ends it's like ripping apart two pieces of paper glued together – both pieces are damaged in the process – sometimes one more than the other. One testimony I read this week was from a Christian lady whose husband had abandoned their marriage. She described divorce as "being plunged into hell" and then went on to say that "divorce leaves half your body on the other side of a closed door."

In my second year at uni I lived with a guy who had gone through a divorce, and He described it in a similar way. I remember the many times he would simply just break down and start weeping at home.

Divorce is a difficult topic for many of us to think about. But it can also be a confusing topic for Christians to think about. We have questions like – "Is it even allowed? When is it allowed? What if my spouse leaves me?"

The topic of divorce can be difficult and sometimes confusing. So like the church in Corinth we need to listen to what God's words has to say about it so that we will know how best to honour Jesus in the mess and complexity of marriage.

So what we'll do is think about the context and God's general principle that marriage is for life. Then we'll spend some time thinking through the particular issue that was present in Corinth and also exists today where a Christian is married to someone who is not a Christian.

Context.

So, let's think about the context. Paul's words about divorce here form part of "the matters they wrote about" in 7:1. But why would the Corinthians be so interested in the topic of divorce?

We're not told explicitly but I think there are a few reasons we can gather from this passage and the historical context.

1. Common in the RE.

The first reason that divorce may have been on their minds was that it was just so common in the RE. In the Roman world, wives along with husbands were legally allowed to divorce one another. Much like today, divorce was accessible to most free people who wanted one. In fact it wasn't uncommon for people to be divorced multiple times.

Thus, to insist on marriage as a *life-long* commitment – as we'll see Jesus teaches – was to go against the grain of Roman culture.

It's the whole, "if everyone else is doing it, why can't we?"

2. *Unhelpful Theology.*

But another reason may have been that the Corinthians simply had an incorrect theology or view of marriage. We know from the previous passage last week on Sex, that there were some in the church who had a negative view of sex even in marriage. It's possible that even the marriage union was something that was being cast in negative terms – something worldly that the truly spiritual would separate themselves from.

3. *Complexity of spiritually mixed marriage.*

But the third reason – (which I think is most on Paul's mind as he writes these words) is the unease many in the church had with their spiritually mixed marriages. The Corinthians were first generation believers who had been converted from pagan idolatry. And because of this many of them still had husbands or wives who were thoroughly pagan.

Not only did this create an entirely new complexity to the marriage (as we'll discuss), it produced a sense of fear in some that they were somehow compromising their own holiness by remaining married to their spouse. Was divorce the right option in such matters of spiritual purity? Or wasn't it? What if the unbelieving spouse couldn't stand the believer's new faith and simply left them... What then? Are we still bound to the marriage Paul? Or aren't we?

And it's helpful for us to know this context, because it reminds us that the Corinthian believers are real people, with real anxieties, who were really trying to grapple with the question of divorce. These people weren't simply trying to figure out how to think theologically about marriage and divorce – as though it was a question on some bible college essay... They were trying to figure out how to live their lives Christianly in a society where

divorce was common, in a church where theology on this matter was confusing, and in their home which, for many, contained real unease and complexity because of their pagan spouse.

Like the Corinthians, many of you will be thinking of the topic of divorce with real life experience in mind – maybe of a friend, or parents, or even yourself. This topic is not something to treat clinically, but pastorally. And that’s what Paul does, he comes as a loving pastor to this believers and helps them (and us) think Christianly about divorce.

So what does he say to them? Well, he begins by reiterating the teaching of Jesus who says marriage is life-long (which deals with the first two points of context). But he then addresses their specific big issue of what to do when you are married with someone who isn’t a Christian.

1. Marriage is for life.

The first thing Paul reminds the Corinthians is that marriage is for life. That is the big principle that he starts. Christian marriage is an exclusive life-long union between a husband and wife. Look at the way Paul reminds his readers of the Lord’s teaching on this matter.

Look at verse 10:

¹⁰ To the married I give this command—not I, but the Lord—a wife is not to leave^[f] her husband. ¹¹ But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband—and a husband is not to divorce his wife.

Now, as we’ll see, Jesus and His apostle Paul both speak to extreme and devastating circumstances in which divorce is permitted, but the overarching message of Jesus is that His

people should not divorce but keep the marriage covenant. And Paul is serious about this isn't he? So much so that he tells those who have already separated (presumably *without* sufficient grounds) to remain unmarried or be reconciled.

Now, in a society where divorce was both prevalent and acceptable, the idea of exclusive life-long marriage would have been viewed as pretty extreme. And many in our world today, can think a little like that too.

I remember some years ago speaking with a friend who isn't a Christian who popped over to our house. She was was interested in the preparation I had been doing on a wedding sermon that day. We got chatting about the Christian understanding of marriage and how Jesus speaks of it as a life-long commitment.

I remember her saying: "I don't know... Is it really reasonable to expect two people to stay in a monogamous relationship for decades? Maybe when the life expectancy was like 30 but now?"

And you can sort of understand her hesitation can't you? People change over time, circumstances change, romance cools, frustrations come in.

But what I imperfectly tried to explain to her was that Christian commitment in marriage is supposed to be a reflection of the greater commitment and love Jesus has for His people. The commitment that saw Him enter our world, die for our sins and rise again to establish a restored and everlasting relationship between sinners and God. This is why in Ephesians 5 Paul tells Husbands to love their wives like Christ loved the church ([Eph 5:25](#)).

Christian marriage is all about life-long and serious commitment because that is what Christ shows to us.

But it's also because that's how God designed it to be from the beginning of creation. That's what we heard Jesus say in our first bible reading tonight. When the religious leaders of his day questioned why the Law commanded people to get a divorce in certain circumstances, Jesus explained that it was because of the hardness of the human heart that God *allowed* divorce (not commanded it) – but that it was not this way from the beginning – and our goal should be to live out that original and good design.

But Jesus does list one exception in which the marriage covenant becomes so destroyed and devastated that divorce is permitted. And that exception He says is the betrayal of sexual immorality. And Paul will also provide another devastating basis for divorce in a moment.

Our hearts are hard. Our world is sinful. There will be moments when married people so terribly break the marriage covenant that divorce is permitted – but we are not to lose sight of the principle – Marriage is for life.

App – Do you understand the commitment of marriage?

And we need to hear this because our culture often tells us to think of our happiness and our fulfillment above all things. And so, if your marriage isn't making you happy anymore, or if you don't find it fulfilling it's time to think twice about whether you should stick it out.

In fact, research has shown that the main reasons marriages end in Australia is not because of adultery or abandonment but because of communication and compatibility issues.

We are called to a committed love like Jesus against the prevailing attitudes and practice of our culture... How do we do this? How do we cultivate longevity in marriage?

- Maybe it means you carve out a regular time for a date night to talk, or prayer time.
- Maybe it means you think about marriage counselling if the challenges are getting too much.
- Maybe it means speaking with a mature Christian or pastor to help you work through things and seek some advice. Or even to do some of the marriage exercises from the prepare-enrich material we use with both pre and post marriage couples.

If you are struggling in your marriage, please come and talk, because we want to help you honour Jesus by faithfully living out your marriage commitment to one another.

But Pauls (Jesus') words are also a reminder to those who are unmarried. Marriage is for life. Christians do not think of divorce like an insurance policy we can pull out whenever we want out.

So chose carefully. Chose wisely the person you enter into that relationship with. You need to think, am I prepared to spend the rest of my life with this person. I know I can't know them at every level, but have I seen evidence of Christian conviction and love of Jesus? Have I seen or heard of evidence of kindness, patience, generosity, service?

You are being asked to do the rest of your life with person you marry. That's huge. And God gives us grace for that, but that does not mean we shouldn't think seriously about entering into marriage with someone.

But what about those who are married to unbelievers?

So, Paul lays down the general principle when it comes to the topic of divorce. Christian marriage is life-long.

But in verses 12ff Paul moves his focus to address the specific pastoral concern of a number of other married believers in Corinth who were married to unbelievers.

Remember, many of the Christians in Corinth, would have already been in pagan marriages prior to their conversion. And it's important we appreciate the real pastoral issue this was and still remains for the church today.

There are three big areas where these complexities would have been felt in Corinthian church.

- The first complexity involved **worship**. Imagine coming home to your spouse and telling them you now *reject* all the local gods and have chosen instead to worship a crucified saviour who claims to have died for your sin. Imagine the kitchen table discussion on that one: “Are you crazy? And what do you mean you’re not going to worship our gods?!.... Do you want them to bring disaster on our family!?” There are many Christians today who can resonate with this. Particularly those who have become Christian from another culture and religious background. We have people in our community who have gone through this pain. Worship of Jesus is eternally worth it but can be a huge point of complexity.
- The second complexity involved **values**. Corinthian society was comfortable and accepting of many values that butted up against the way of Jesus. For example, CS was comfortable with promiscuous sexual activity – Jesus taught sexual self-control.

CS valued pride and power – Jesus taught humility and service of others. And this is a point which is real for Christian today. Now, not every believer who is married to an unbeliever will feel this in a major way, but some certainly will. One sister in Christ who comes to Bundy – who gave me permission to share this – said that when she became a Christian in her married years, her husband told her with a level of grief that “she was not the person he had married.” Sometimes Jesus’ way of life will be compelling, other times it will be a source of grief and frustration.

- The third complexity involved **practices**. The believing husband or wife now had church meetings they went to. They now prayed in the family home. Some may have studied scripture in the home. All these things would have been so different for their spouse to see. They would have taken time and energy. Again, this can be a point of complexity today for a believing spouse. “My husband and I have always visited his parents on Sunday mornings, what should I do?” “My wife doesn’t like how much time my new faith is taking up, how should I respond?”

For believers married to unbelievers in Corinth, life was complex. But there was also anxiety as well as complexity for many in the Corinthian church. Some, it would seem were anxious that their marriage union to their unbelieving and idol-worshipping spouse would somehow spiritually compromise them... Almost as though, through spiritual osmosis, they would become infected with impurity. And you actually see that anxiety in other religions and sects today – where ceremonial washing is required after you associate with someone who is considered “unclean.”

Put yourself in the shoes of one of these Corinthian believers. Imagine how you might respond to that kind of complexity and anxiety.

Was the solution to this complexity and fear for spiritual purity a good reason to simply opt out of the marriage? Paul gives two responses that emphasise the commitment of marriage but also the painful reality of spousal abandonment.

(1) “If they will live with you, do not divorce them.” And (2), “if they leave, you are not bound.” Let’s think about the first position.

2. If they will live with you, do not divorce them.

So, the first thing Paul says to those who are married to unbelievers is that they must not divorce if their spouse is willing to live with them. You see it there in verse 12:

¹² But I (not the Lord) say to the rest: If any brother has an unbelieving wife and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³ Also, if any woman has an unbelieving husband and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce her husband.

Now, I should point out that when Paul says “I (not the Lord) say...” He is not suggesting that we should take his words with less authority than Jesus’ words – Remember Paul is an apostle of Jesus – He speaks with Jesus’ authority. What he is saying is that unlike his previous comments in verses 10 and 11, he is no longer quoting Jesus directly. Jesus was never confronted with this particular concern during his earthly ministry and so Paul is making clear that he is now dealing with a different issue that requires a further word.

And so, Paul is saying in verses 12 and 13 that where the unbelieving spouse is willing to live with the believing spouse, you must not divorce. In many circumstances unbelievers *will* be okay continuing on in the marriage despite the new complexities. And many of you will know instances where that is the case – maybe you’re even in that situation. Despite the differences, the spouse who isn’t a Christian still says, “I’m still committed to you, I still love you... I don’t get it all, but I made a promise to stick it out with you through thick and thin.”

But there will be other instances where the spouse who isn’t a Christian likewise wants to stay in the marriage, but *does* actually struggle..

“This is hard, we have such different beliefs, but I guess I’m willing to give it a go.”

There will be difference in enthusiasm but where there is a willingness to stay in the marriage God is saying do not leave them.

God does not want the believer to suddenly turn to their spouse and say – “Well I’m not sure *I* can cope with the differences! I’m not sure I can still love you... I think I want out.”

Believers are called to demonstrate *Christ-like* commitment to their marriage covenant. “If Christ is committed to me with all my sin and complexity, I will remain committed to my spouse with whatever complexity will come.”

But what about the other big concern in the Corinthian church that an unbelieving husband or wife (most of whom would have been pagan idol worshippers) might compromise their holiness. Well, Paul’s response to this fear is striking. “It’s not that your unbelieving brings you into their realm of spiritual darkness, it’s that you bring *them* into your realm of spiritual light and holiness. Look at what Paul says in verse 14:

¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy by the husband.

So, what does it mean that an unbelieving husband or wife “is made holy.” Well, it can’t mean that they are saved through simply being married to Christian. In verse 16 Paul is clear that the salvation of an unbelieving spouse is something that may or may not happen..

Holiness here, I think represents the way an unbelieving spouse has uniquely been set apart to God in a way that other unbelievers have not. Unlike other pagans who knew nothing of God or Christ. Unlike other pagans who were surrounded in spiritual darkness. These people were uniquely exposed to the light of the gospel through their believing spouse. They could hear from their spouse the good news that Christ has died and rose again for sinners and that forgiveness and eternal life can be found in Him. They could see and experience the life-transforming nature of that message in the new-found humility, love and tenderness of their spouse.

And the same is true for their children says Paul. Verse 14

Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy.

Kids, like their unbelieving parent, were also exposed to the gospel – and more so. In many cases they were being raised by their believing parent to see Jesus as the one who saves them. We actually see this in 2 Tim 1:5 – Timothy’s salvation can be traced back to his believing mother Eunice, which could be traced back to Eunice’ believing mother, Lois.

Christians are not defiled by their unbelieving spouse. Instead an unbelieving spouse is “made holy” – uniquely set apart from the world to hear, see, experience the gospel in their believing spouse.

Lee Strobel the author of *Case for Christ*, speaks about the way this happened to him, when he was an atheist and his wife became a Christian:

“I saw positive changes in her values, in her character, in the way she related to me and the children. It was winsome; and it was attractive; and it made me want to check things out. So I went to church one day...mainly to see if I could get her out of this cult that she had gotten involved in... I walked out saying—I was still an atheist—but also saying, ‘If this is true, this has huge implications for my life.’”

Lee Strobel was exposed to the gospel through his relationship with his wife. She became an example of 1 Peter 3 which says that:

even if some [husbands] disobey the word, they may be won over without a word by the way their wives live² when they observe your pure, reverent lives

And in God’s kindness he eventually found salvation himself through faith in the Lord Jesus.

Application

I think it’s important to realise at this point that situations where a Christian is married to someone who isn’t a Christian will be varied. In many cases, such marriages will still be very encouraging experiences, filled with love and understanding. But in other cases, the

differences will be big, complex, and painful. But this passage reminds us that even in the complexity God is committed to those marriage. And if you're in this situation you need to hear this. God doesn't desire for your marriage to end. He doesn't think it is less valuable than others. His Spirit can help you. And in His sovereign mercy, a seemingly complex situation can become a context for your spouse to see, hear, and experience the gospel.

And for the rest of us, we should pray to that end. That God would be gracious to such circumstances. Most of us will know friends or family members who are believers married to unbelievers. Do we pray for them? Do we ask how it's going? Do we encourage them? Do we seek to get to know their spouse? I don't know about you, but I feel like I do not do this enough. And I need to change.

If they are willing, do not divorce, says Paul.

3. If they abandon you, you are not bound.

The second thing Paul says to those who are married to unbelievers is that “if they abandon you, you are not bound to the marriage.”

Now, divorce is not something Paul speaks of lightly. We know from his earlier words that his great desire (God's great desire) is for our marriages to remain, life-long unions of love and commitment. But Paul recognises there are circumstances that so terribly break the marriage covenant that in some cases it may be irreparable. Jesus listed the case of SI in Matthew 19. Here Paul speaks of the situation in which an unbeliever simply abandon's the marriage and leaves.

¹⁵ But if the unbeliever leaves, let him leave. A brother or a sister is not bound in such cases.

God has called you²¹ to live in peace.

Think of the anxiety a wife or a husband goes through when abandoned by their spouse.

- “Will they ever return?”
- “Should I chase them down?”
- “What could I have done differently?”
- “What does all this mean now? Am I called to float in a kind of married but not married limbo?”

Paul is saying, “no.” In such circumstances, God does not want his child to be live in anxiety and confusion, but peace. They are not bound. They are free to divorce. And this chapter reminds us that the believer is free to remarry also. Verse 28 says that those who have been released from their spouse have *not* sinned if they remarry.

When an unbelieving spouse abandon’s the marriage, God’s word says they are free to let them go. They are not bound to the marriage.

Now Paul final comments on this matter – in verse 16 - could be read two distinct ways. And bible translations have differed over which one they prefer. The CSB for example translates verse 16 in a more optimistic frame like this:

¹⁶ Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.

Whereas, the ESV translates this verse in more pessimistic frame like this:

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?

If the former is the correct translation, it's kind of like Paul is circling back to his earlier encouragement in verse 14 for believers to stay in their marriage with willing unbelievers. "Don't not divorce them... and also, you never know God might actually bring them to salvation through you."

If the latter is the correct translation, it's kind of like Paul is finishing his thought on the idea letting an unbeliever go and living in peace.. My own view is that this is the more likely reading, as it fits more neatly into Paul's flow of reasoning. "Don't make yourself anxious over what you cannot control in this moment of desperation and devastation.... Don't think his or her salvation depends on you. Leave it to God." I think Paul is being pastorally sensitive to people who have been abandoned, who can't stop the process from happening and are understandable worried for the salvation of their spouse who they may still love.

One Christian lady writing for the gospel coalition wrote of her feelings of guilt towards her husband who lost his faith and later abandoned the marriage:

I kept thinking, If only I had better answers to his questions; if only I were more patient, less sinful; then maybe he would still believe. She then went on to describe how a friend had to help her accept that she could play the role of the HS in her husband's life.

Abandonment is awful. It leaves people feeling lost, devastated. On top of that there is the anxiety for the spiritual well-being of the person leaving.

This is another reminder of our need as a Church to care for people in such circumstances. To comfort them. To welcome them into our lives, our homes. To listen to them. To love them and keep pointing them back to Christ. We need to care for such people.

One of the things I've noticed about Paul as I've been studying 1 Corinthians 7 is his willingness to engage pastorally with these believers and to address real questions about life and relationships. So on that note I just want to address a couple of other questions about abandonment/divorce that sometimes come out of Paul's teaching here.

1. Does abandonment automatically mean divorce?

Not necessarily. Like SI in Matthew 19, divorce is "permitted" not commanded. In the case of both SI and abandonment by an unbeliever, some may chose not to divorce. If that is the choice, we should pray for them and strongly advise them, where possible to enlist the help of counsellors and pastors. The difficulty with abandonment is that the other party often does not wish to return to the marriage or work on things. In any case, the decision to pursue divorce is not often easy to make, sometimes there are complicating factors or things people are unsure of, so it's actually good to seek counsel from a other wise people on the matter.

Proverbs 11:14 says:

¹⁴ For lack of guidance a nation falls,

but victory is won through many advisers.

People need helpful advise in such moments. That might be an older wiser Christian, or someone who has also walked that path. Hebrews 13:17 speak of Church leaders, pastors, elders as those who are called to keep watch over people. They too are good to be speaking with.

2. *Is spousal abuse a form of abandonment?*

As with everything you hear, you should to test what I say by the Scriptures. But I am inclined to believe that it spousal abuse can be a form of abandonment. If the actions of one spouse become so intolerable and abusive the other person may well be forced to leave or flee their home. In such a case it's not so much that the abusive spouse has left, but forced the other out, which in many ways *does* denote a form of abandonment. As William Perkins (the famous English puritan) said:

“For to depart from one, and drive one away by threat, are equipollent [equivalent].”

Where there is no change on the part of the abusive spouse (and where there is no repentance if the person is claiming to be Christian) there may well be grounds for divorce.

And let me say at this point that if you believe you *are* suffering any kind of abuse from your spouse, I'd advise you to speak with the proper authorities – the police, or even an organisation like 1800 respect. And again, as pastors we would also want to provide love and support to you in this moment.

Conclusion

Tonight, we've thought about the unpleasant topic of divorce and how God wants us to think about it as Christians. And it is unpleasant isn't it, because we all want that happily ever after when it comes to marriage.

But the good news amidst such a bad news subject is that for those who know Jesus – a better happily ever after is promised. In Revelation Jesus is described as the great bridegroom who welcomes His people (His bride) into eternal joy with Him forever. He has saved us through his death and resurrection, and he has committed himself to us forever.

He will never leave you.

He will never stop loving you.

He will give you the fulfillment you long for.

He will give you that happily ever after. So let us all cling to the right marriage. Not those on earth, but the one to come with Christ our saviour.

Let's Pray.