

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

Divorce (Among Believers)

January 18th, 2015

1 Corinthians 7:10-11

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7:10; that's on page 955 in your pew Bible. I had originally planned to cover verses 10-16 in one message but as I began to prepare and as I reflected upon all of the email I've received and the meetings I've had with folks who are dealing with these issues in real life, I've decided that we are going to need two weeks to cover this section. This week we will talk about divorce among professed believers and next week we will talk about divorce between a believer and an unbeliever. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

¹⁰To 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. (1 Corinthians 7:10–11 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Before we begin to pull some principles and applications out of this text I think we will be well served by a brief study of the cultural context.

Cultural Context:

The first thing you should know is that divorce was extraordinarily common in the ancient world – both in the Roman context and in the Jewish context.

Divorce was very common and probably most marriages ended before the death of a partner. Instone-Brewer observes that “Graeco-Roman marriage certificates were worded as though they expected the marriage to end in divorce, not death.”¹

Marriage was not forever in the Greco-Roman world. We feel today that marriage is in a terrible state – and it is, relative to where it was 50 or a 100 years ago but not relative to where it was 2000 years ago. The reason our grandparents felt the way they did about marriage was because of their Christian heritage. It was when Rome was Christianized that marriage came to be highly regarded. Now that we Western folks are losing our Christian heritage, we should not be surprised that we are also losing marriage. The one undergirds the other. Marriage was also not highly regarded by Jewish people. We note that simply by reading the question that some Pharisees posed to Jesus:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife **for any cause?**” (Matthew 19:3 ESV)

Jewish law did not permit a woman to initiate a divorce, but Jewish men divorced their wives for all sorts of reasons – even for burning their dinner or for being unattractive in their physical appearance. That was the cultural background and it is therefore no wonder that when Jesus finished giving his teaching on divorce the disciples said:

“If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” (Matthew 19:10 ESV)

You have to understand that what Christianity teaches about marriage WAS COMPLETELY new and revolutionary to EVERYONE that heard it, Jew and Gentile. Outside of cultures that are or have been dominated by Christianity, divorce has remarkably common and so it was in Paul’s day and knowing that helps us figure out what question from the Corinthians resulted in this particular teaching. We have a little bit more homework to do with this passage than we did with last week’s text. In last week’s text, Paul quotes their question which resulted in his teaching – that is enormously helpful to people reading this letter 2000 years later. He doesn’t do that here,

¹Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 292.

but if we read what he says in these verses and then also in verses 12-15 we can reverse engineer the text and come up with a very solid guess as to what their question was. NT scholars suggest that the situation was approximately this:

In Corinth wives who knew that their husbands had a history of sexual immorality may have wondered whether or not Paul expected them to abandon their husbands.²

If you think about it that makes a ton of sense. Imagine that Bob and Sue Pagan got married and then several years later became Christians. Bob is a typical Greco-Roman man. He loves Sue and he has regular sex with his male and female servants. He also has a monthly visit with a highly paid prostitute. Bob is a Christian – he loves Jesus – but he hasn't yet understood that loving Jesus implies living differently in the body. Sue on the other hand, came to that realization rather early in her Christian life. She is painfully aware that Bob is conducting himself in a sinful and reprehensible manner. But what is she to do? She is a Roman and in Roman society a woman does not question her husband's sexual activities. She writes to the Apostle Paul – whom she knows has no patience for sexual immorality – and she asks whether she ought to divorce Bob. That is in all likelihood the precise question that lies behind this text.

Biblical Background:

Now, in order to understand Paul's counsel we also need to be aware of the 2 sources that he is referencing in his answer. Paul begins his response by saying that this teaching comes from the Lord. He says:

To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord) ... (1 Corinthians 7:10 ESV)

Paul says, "I don't need to innovate here, I don't require special insight from the Holy Spirit, I have an existing teaching from Jesus." Jesus talked about divorce and so we should obey what he said. Scholars agree that Paul is likely referencing the teaching of Jesus that we have recorded in places like Mark 10, Matthew 5 and Matthew 19. Those texts, scholars agree, give us Jesus' Divine interpretation of what Moses said in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. So let's look at what Moses said and then we'll look at what Jesus said about what Moses said and then we'll be ready to look

²Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 290-291.

at how Paul applied what Jesus said about what Moses meant. Are you ready? Turn in your Bibles to Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

¹“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found **some indecency** in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house,² and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife,³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife,⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance. (Deuteronomy 24:1–4 ESV)

The text above has a very specific purpose – to eliminate ill conceived and hasty divorce. Moses is saying to a man – “Do not think to put your wife away in anger or haste and then after trying out the green pastures on the other side of the fence and realizing that things were better with the first woman, that you can put aside the second woman and go back to the first as though nothing has happened – such a thing is an abomination!” The text is dealing with a gross sort of “wife swap” and a very casual approach to marriage that ought not to exist within the covenant community. We make adulterers of ourselves when we engage in such practices. That is what Deuteronomy 24 is saying – on that there is very little debate. Jesus, multiple times in the New Testament, corrects a wrong understanding of that passage that was very common in contemporary Judaism. We want to remember that Jesus NEVER contradicts the teaching of the Old Testament – Jesus wrote the Old Testament – he is the Word of God in the FLESH - so we do not expect to see him correcting Moses. We do not expect Jesus to be saying: “Moses permitted you to divorce but Moses was wrong on that score, I say that you must never divorce”. Jesus never corrected Moses; Jesus INSPIRED MOSES – but he did often CLARIFY Moses or rather CLARIFIED how Moses was being READ. Stop right there. There is a principle there for Bible readers. The Bible is authoritative and inerrant – but your reading of it MAY NOT BE. Moses was not wrong, but they were READING MOSES WRONG. That’s an important distinction. In Matthew 5:31-32 Jesus is clarifying how the term “some indecency” should be rightly understood.

I’ve mentioned before that the Rabbis in Jesus day argued over this point. Some said that “some indecency” could include burning a husband’s dinner, being unpleasant or unattractive, or having an odious personality. Others understood it more narrowly but Jesus provides the clarity that the Rabbis lacked. He said:

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. (Matthew 5:31–32 ESV)

This is no different than what Jesus said in Matthew 19:

³ And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?”⁴ He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,⁵ and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’?⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”⁷ They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?”⁸ He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.”⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” (Matthew 19:3–9 ESV)

When members of the covenant community engage in “cheap divorce” we make of ourselves adulterers and the fault lies with the person who initiates the divorce wrongly. He or she is the one who “makes adulteries” as it were. Matthew 5:31-32 and Matthew 19:3-9 are properly understood as Divine clarifications of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which we remember deals chiefly with the issue of whether a man can take back his former wife. Jesus seems to be saying that divorce should never even be considered in the first place unless there has been sexual immorality. Further, if a marriage is dissolved for reasons less than that, up until the point where the original parties have remarried, reconciliation between the wrongfully divorced parties should be pursued until the man has remarried. Indeed, that seems to have been the understanding of the Apostle Paul. Listen again now to what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11:

¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (**not I, but the Lord**): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. (1 Corinthians 7:10–11 ESV)

Paul is recruiting the teaching of Jesus, presumably from Matthew 5 and 19 (though not yet in that form of course) to comment on the proper perspective on divorce within the covenant community. 1 Corinthians 7 is therefore commentary upon commentary upon Deuteronomy 24! We have Paul applying what Jesus said when he told us what Moses meant! On this rather layered and complicated teaching Jay Adams writes:

“The command not to separate by divorce (*chorizo*) stands; but Paul says, if the wife disobeys this command (and presumably, this holds for the husband too) and does dissolve the marriage by divorce, she must remain unmarried (i.e. not marry another) so that she will be in a position at all times to repent and be reconciled to her husband. If she marries another, she pushes her disobedience one step beyond and gets herself into an irremediable situation(cf. Deut. 24:1-4)”³

Alright – we’ve done our homework. We’ve talked about the cultural background that would

³ Jay E. Adams, Marriage, Divorce, And Remarriage In The Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 41.

conceivable cause a Christian woman to think she was doing the right thing for divorcing her husband – even though he was a professed Christian – because he was doing things that while acceptable and normal for Greco-Roman men, were not acceptable for a Christian. Paul in answering her has made reference to the teaching of Jesus which clarified and affirmed the consistent message of Scripture. Let me summarize what the Apostle Paul has said here about divorce among professed believers:

Divorce Amongst Professed Believers:

1. Should be extraordinarily rare; it should really NEVER happen

It is interesting to note that Paul doesn't even quote the one exemption clause that Jesus provides. He doesn't say: "Don't divorce unless there has been sexual immorality" – he doesn't contradict that, he just doesn't mention that which further strengthens the argument that divorce between two authentic, spirit-filled believers is virtually inconceivable. Why would you need to get divorced? You have all the resources necessary to overcome whatever trouble your marriage might be in. Let's again, imagine the scenario that scholars believe Paul is specifically addressing. A Christian woman is married to a man who also professes to be a believer but who is engaging in culturally acceptable but clearly immoral sexual practices. It is very easy to transpose this scenario into a modern day key. A Christian woman is married to a professed believer who is doing something the culture says is fine but that she as a Christian has come to understand is clearly, Biblically immoral, such as - regularly watching pornography. Right? That is a culturally acceptable but clearly immoral – Matthew 5:28 – form of behaviour indulged in by many a professed Christian man. That's a contemporary scenario that fits this teaching perfectly – its not the only one, but it fits. Now, what should she do about that? Should she divorce him? No, Paul says. Why would she do that? As believers they have all the resources they need collectively to overcome this problem. He has the indwelling Holy Spirit, he has the Word of God, he has Christian community in the church and he has the prayers of himself and of his wife. Surely that should be sufficient for his growth and recovery.

The NT assumes that the ordinary graces are more than sufficient for overcoming; by degrees and with much perseverance; normal, fleshly temptations. He can, by God's grace, overcome. And she can, by God's grace, forgive. Keep in mind, before these two are husband and wife, they are

brother and sister in Christ and the Scriptures say:

³ If your brother sins, rebuke him, and **if he repents, forgive him**,⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ **you must forgive him**.” (Luke 17:3–4 ESV)

Let’s read that last line together: “You must forgive him”. Now, if its true that the grace of God in a sinner’s life is sufficient to overcome any temptation or failing and if its also true that the grace of God is sufficient to help any Christian person forgive someone who has wronged then, it is essentially inconceivable that Christians would need to divorce.

The second thing we would want to say on the basis of this passage is that divorce among professed believers:

2. Should only be considered in cases of unrepentant sexual immorality

Let me take a minute and explain some of those words that I’ve just used. Obviously we are not to divorce our Christian spouse if they have repented and asked for our forgiveness. We’ve already quoted Jesus as saying:

³ If your brother sins, rebuke him, and **if he repents, forgive him**,⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ **you must forgive him**.” (Luke 17:3–4 ESV)

The disciples obviously understood how broadly this impressive command would have to be applied because Luke records their reaction to it:

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5 ESV)

Again, it is important to note that what Jesus is saying here is completely NEW. No one in Judaism or in the Greco-Roman world had ever said anything like this before. Jesus has just told the disciples that it would be virtually impossible for them to ever divorce their spouse and now he tells them that whatever failings another believer may have must be forgiven, without question upon the profession of contrition and repentance. Notice that it doesn’t even say: “Assuming that the profession of repentance can be verified and demonstrated over a long period of time.” No, in in Jesus’ scenario this all happens in one day! If a brother or sister sins against you 7 times and in one day repents 7 times then you have to forgive him. Forgiveness for followers of Jesus is

never optional; he made that very clear in Matthew chapter 6:

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14–15 ESV)

If you don't forgive your brother or sister then you are NOT a brother or sister – that's a pretty clear statement. Let me apply all of this very straightforwardly. Suppose our former pagans Bob and Sue are the Christian marriage in question here. Sue is disgusted with Bob. Bob has become convicted by the Apostle Paul's letter that he really ought to stop having sex with his servants and with the prostitute. He determines that he will. However, its hard to stop and he has a relapse. He has a few relapses. He goes to Sue and he repents. Sue, according to this text, **MUST FORGIVE BOB**. If Sue does not forgive Bob, then she is herself a sinner and subject to church discipline. She is sinning against Bob by withholding grace. If she persists she could be disciplined and if she continues to persist under discipline then she would be excommunicated and declared publicly to be an unbeliever. That is nothing more than the straightforward application of these passages from Matthew and Luke. That's what Paul applies here. Divorce between believers should be extraordinarily rare and only considered in the case of unrepentant sexual immorality.

Let me define what is meant by “sexual immorality”. You will sometimes hear Christians misremember the exception clause and say that divorce is only permissible between Christians in cases of adultery, but that is not what Jesus said. He said “sexual immorality” and he used the Greek word *pornea*. The Greek word *pornea* has a range of meanings but is almost certainly a reference to the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18-20 which says things like this:

²⁰ And you shall not lie sexually with **your neighbor's wife** and so make yourself unclean with her..... ²² You shall not lie **with a male as with a woman**; it is an abomination. ²³ And you shall not lie **with any animal** and so make yourself unclean with it, neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it: it is perversion. (Leviticus 18:20–24 ESV)

¹⁷“If a man takes **his sister**, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace, and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people.... (Leviticus 20:17 ESV)

Thus by *pornea* we can safely conclude that Jesus considers adultery, homosexual sex, incest and bestiality as constituting grounds for divorce. If a man or a woman engages in such activities, if there is no repentance, then divorce can be considered. Please note – in such circumstances

divorce can be considered – it is never required! A Christian can always choose to be wronged. A Christian is meek and trusts in the final judgment to sort out all injustice, a Christian has the resource of prayer and intimate access to a God who can do the impossible and who can save the most damned and lost of men and so the Christian can choose to suffer wrong and to persevere in a bad marriage that includes even sexual immorality in hopes of winning her husband to repentance. Divorce is never required, but in cases of unrepentant sexual immorality, it can be considered.

The third thing we would want to say about the matter of divorce between two professed believers is that:

3. Reconciliation even after divorce should be pursued until it cannot be effected

Paul says that in verse 11:

(but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband)... (1 Corinthians 7:11 ESV)

Again let me quote theologian Jay Adams:

“The command not to separate by divorce (*chorizo*) stands; but Paul says, if the wife disobeys this command (and presumably, this holds for the husband too) and does dissolve the marriage by divorce, she must remain unmarried (i.e. not marry another) so that she will be in a position at all times to repent and be reconciled to her husband. If she marries another, she pushes her disobedience one step beyond and gets herself into an irremediable situation(cf. Deut. 24:1-4)”⁴

If you divorce for less than unrepentant sexual immorality – or even because of sexual immorality – you don’t do that in order to quickly marry someone new – you do even that in the hopes of shocking your husband into repentance. You stay unmarried as long as there is even a glimmer of hope for reconciliation. Now, to be clear and we’ll talk more about this next week, if Bob - to go back to our standard analogy – if Bob persists in sexual immorality and Sue confronts him on that and he still persists, then the Bible assumes that she will begin to involve the church community. Jesus said that:

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be

⁴ Jay E. Adams, Marriage, Divorce, And Remarriage In The Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 41.

established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. (Matthew 18:15–17 ESV)

So if Sue confronts Bob and Bob will not repent of his sexual immorality then Sue brings along another member of the church – probably the pastor or an elder. If Bob still refuses to repent, they take the matter to the church generally. This in all likelihood meant that it was handed over to the church leadership. It became at that point a matter of official discipline. Bob would be under considerable pressure to repent at this point. If Bob still refuses to repent, this is what Jesus said should happen:

¹⁷ And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:17–18 ESV)

If Bob doesn't repent after all of that, then in truth, Bob is not a Christian anyway and he should be publicly declared as such. Remember what I said earlier, the Bible assumes that with the Holy Spirit inside you and the Bible washing over you – REAL CHRISTIANS ARE CONVICTED AND CONFORMED to the image of Christ. By one degree of glory to the next. Real Christians change. Christianity IS REPENTANCE, Martin Luther said. If there is no repentance – even under the extreme pressure of church discipline – the person is not saved. That means, that this isn't scenario #1 after all. It's scenario #2 – a believer married to an unbeliever and that; as we shall see next week; that changes everything.

I hate to leave you mid- message but I needed to err on the side of thoroughness. This is a huge issue in the church because we have been afraid to be different than the culture, we have been afraid to appear harsh and unloving and because we have been afraid to bring the full resources of the church to bear upon those who are sinning. What the Bible teaches about marriage and divorce cannot be lived out unless we also apply what the Bible teaches about church discipline. Since we do not do the latter, we have been unable to do the former and now we are a general mess. We need to grow as a church on this matter of marriage and divorce. We cannot afford any longer to be conformed to the pattern of this world. We need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds that we might prove what the will of God is; that which is good, acceptable and perfect. For the glory of God and the good of all people, this is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God.