
Is Singleness Better?

1 Corinthians 7:6-15¹⁰

Russ Kennedy

Paul deals with singleness in the church. He deals with those who find themselves single due to God's direct providences. And he deals with those who may want to end their marriages and become single again. In doing so he addresses the issue of divorce in the church.

The Issue of Singleness and Widowhood (v. 6-9)

Paul begins with dealing with the issues of singleness and widowhood.

⁶ Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. ⁷ I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

A Shared Affinity with Them (v. 6-7)

Verse 6 serves as a bridge between the section that went before and this section. The permission for temporary abstinence in marriage is a spiritual concession, not a required command. Paul's own singleness was highly desirable since he was freed to serve undistracted, as he will state later.

However, life-long singleness for the sake of ministry is a gift, a grace from God. Few have it. Paul appears to have it. Those who are single by God's providence and not yet married or remarried, have grace from God to remain pure. Both of these are passing. But the gift of singleness enables a life of ministry.

A Wise Counsel to Them (v. 8-9)

Paul reminds them that singleness is good. They were not to interpret his comments about marriage and intimacy to demean singleness. Given the situation of the day and possibly, the need of the church, the unmarried would be more able to give themselves to ministry. Paul will have more to say about that later.

However, he exhorts them to know themselves. I do not think, "because of your lack of self-control" is meant as a criticism. The Christians there were new in faith. Even

¹⁰ Unless otherwise designated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

those who had been saved were ignorant and immature (Ch.2, 3). Christian self-discipline takes time to cultivate. And there may have been a bit of irony here. But it is better to marry and be able to please the Lord through marital intimacy than to struggle with natural desire becoming lust and immorality.

It seems that these are good and helpful words for us as well.

Singleness is a good thing. It is not a second class, deprived state.

Lifetime singleness is a great but a rare grace and gift.

Providential singleness (not yet married or widowed) has an accompanying grace for purity until marriage.

If you are seeking to remain single and commit to life-long singleness, yet you struggle with the desires, you should seek marriage.

Now, it is hard to be alone and the struggles for purity can be difficult. But it is even harder to choose marriage and be in a difficult marriage. As we will see, marriage is a life-long commitment of another kind.

The Issue of Singleness by Divorce (v. 10-16)

Now we come to a subject that was probably a thorny problem in Corinth. It certainly has become a huge debate and divide over the last 30-40 years. What does the Bible teach about divorce? Can believers get a divorce? Under what circumstances? With what consequences? Can a divorced believer remarry?

One of the things that we must wrestle with is that this is a subject that:

- We have to do very careful exegesis. We must not be driven by our framework, agenda or desire for an outcome.
- We have to bring in other texts or we may leave a wrong impression through incompleteness. Frankly, it is not possible to teach on this subject without considering Jesus' teaching on divorce and forgiveness.
- We must remember that this text, though it has global significance, was written to a local situation. There is a backdrop of trouble and questions that shape Paul's direction and directives in this text.
- We have a limited time so the outside texts will not be explicated, but will be referenced and their impact on this text highlighted.
- We will leave some questions unanswered.

The question behind Paul's directives may not be what we think. This is usually treated as though the question were, "Who can get divorced?" Paul may still be dealing with the larger issues beginning in chapter 5. He may also be dealing with a side-question from the one that opens this chapter. The people in Corinth do not understand the nature of the church. Now they do not understand the brother-sister relationship which forms the foundation for marriage. So, Paul may still be dealing with those who want singleness and sexual abstinence as a means to deeper, mystical spirituality. In other

words, the question may not be “my marriage is troubled and hard and can I get a divorce...” but rather “I want a divorce so I can reach that higher state of single, abstinent spirituality.”

However, whatever the back story is, the directives still stand.

Directives when both are Believers (v. 10-11)

Paul opens by affirming Jesus teaching on divorce.

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.

Paul is giving the charge to the married. It is the same charge that the Lord gave. Now at this time, none of the gospels had been written yet. 1 Corinthians was written around 55-56 AD. Matthew and Mark were written in the late 50's or early 60's. Luke was written in 62. AD But the teaching by Jesus on the subject was known in the church and was known by Paul. So Paul is not referring to one of the gospels here; but he is referring to what the Lord taught that the gospels later record.

Luke's record is the most brief containing the simple statement. Its wording is almost the same as Mark's. Matthew 5:31-32 is similar to Luke's in that it is simply a brief statement. The accounts in Matthew 19:3-10 and Mark 10:9-13 are very similar. They have the back story for Jesus' statement and give us the rationale, the reason for it. Both also record the disciple's reaction to it – frankly, even they were surprised by what Jesus said. Their reaction clearly shows they understood Jesus to be talking about marriage, not the betrothal period.

In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus clearly shows that the allowance for and the regulation of divorce was because of the hardness of their hearts and was given in the Mosaic Covenant. However, from the beginning it was not so. Genesis 2:24 is Jesus' proof that marriage was intended to be a one-flesh union not to be broken. But since sinful people insisted on divorcing their spouses, God introduced regulations in the Mosaic Covenant that regulated the sin of divorce, just as there were regulations of the sin of polygamy.

In all the gospel accounts, the question is asked about divorce. But every single one of Jesus' answers are about divorce and remarriage between God's people. In other words, even Jesus' exception clause is functioning like the Mosaic Law. It is regulating, not just divorce, but remarriage after a divorce. This is important to note. Getting that right will help with not creating a contradiction between what Jesus taught, Paul wrote and the gospel writers later record.

This leads me to make one more observation: in the New Covenant, we are not under the Mosaic Covenant. Those regulations and allowances are not binding. They function, not as Law to us, but as wisdom for us. So listen to Matthew's recording of Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage. **Matthew 19:3–12**

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."

¹⁰ The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." ¹¹ But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. ¹² For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."

And again, what Paul wrote probably about 4-6 years earlier. Notice the actual coherence between the texts. **1 Corinthians 7:9-10**

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.

One other observation: Jesus makes statements of fact. He does not directly forbid divorce, nor remarriage of a divorce person. But a divorced person who remarries committed adultery. These are not imperatives. Neither does Paul. There are imperative verbs scattered all throughout these texts. But the "should not separate" and "should not divorce" are not in the imperative voice. It has the force of a command because of the strong "not" with the verb, which is almost all modern translations handle it the way they do. So what is Paul teaching and how is it expanded or explained by Matthew's record which adds "the exception clause"?

Christians may not divorce.

The wife should not separate from her husband. A husband should not divorce his wife. As uncomfortable as we may be with this statement, it is nevertheless what Paul said. Further, he understands Jesus to have taught the same. In fact, this is not his own charge. This is his repeating the directive of Christ.

A Christian who divorces may not remarry.

However, if the wife does get a divorce, then she may only be reconciled to her husband or remain unmarried until her husband dies. Note that this is a parenthetical. Paul recognizes, as Jesus does, that people will get divorced. There are drastic consequences for doing so. It appears that Paul does not view this as a case of church discipline. The consequences are sufficient themselves.

She may not remarry another man. She is to remain unmarried. It appears that she may remarry upon the death of her former husband.² 1 Corinthians 7:39 which says, "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."

She may remarry her husband. There is an interesting twist. Here the verbs "remain unmarried" and "be reconciled" are both commands. She must actively maintain her unmarried state. Or she must allow herself to be reconciled to her husband. I am emphasizing the difference between the first command which is active voice and the second command which is passive. It seems to me then that Paul is commanding a poise to be reconciled or singleness.

When she is eligible for remarriage, she may only marry another believer, as is true with all believers.

The divorce ends the marriage.

Paul says that the lady who gets a divorce is "unmarried". The lady's divorce does end her marriage. This is where the exception clause in Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:9 may come in. Her divorce is recognized as ending the marriage because she divorced due to immorality. According to all the texts in Matthew, Mark and Luke on divorce, anyone marrying the divorced person, is committing adultery with them. The only exception to that is if the divorce was because of immorality.

Repentance should bring restoration.

What if the adulterer repents and seeks forgiveness? Is the spouse allowed to divorce them anyway? Is the exception clause in Matthew 5:23 and 19:9 a blanket, unqualified exception? Here is the way we teach this in our Counseling Training Course:

As much as we can, we should counsel a believing spouse to forgive a repentant spouse. Though there are enormous difficulties involved, the whole weight of Scripture and God's forgiveness of us must be brought to bear. That God forgave a repentant Israel who had committed adultery over generations sets the standard for our own forgiveness. Further, Jesus tells us that if we will not forgive our brothers and sisters, then we are not forgiven in heaven (Matthew 6:12-15). [Direct quote from Chapel Counseling Training Course, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*.]

We have historically said that forgiveness entails reconciliation as brother and sister and restoration as husband and wife. This is the historical position of the Chapel on these texts. We have generally held them, taught them in Counseling Training Course and have counseled guided by them over the years. However, there are elders who personally hold that the exception clause in Matthew 19 allows the sinned against person to divorce even if the adulterer is repentant. This position holds that forgiveness requires reconciliation as Christians, but not necessarily the restoration of the marriage. We will be having further discussion and listening to the arguments for that position. If the elders are persuaded, then we will modify our position and work through it with you in a future sermon.

There may be situations where this was not the counsel given so this may be confusing. Part of my aim here is to help us all to be working from the text and a common, shared understanding and application of the text.

Directives when One is an Unbeliever (v. 12-16)

Now Paul moves to deal with a situation in the church that the Lord did not directly address.

¹² 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. 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?

The Difficult Commands (v. 12-13)

The believer may remain in a marriage to an unbeliever.

We do not have a question that was asked in the early days of the church. According to extra-Biblical writings, many people who became Christians in the early days of the church were concerned about unbelieving spouses and whether they should even stay in their marriages. Paul indirectly is affirming the wisdom of staying in a marriage even if the spouse never is converted.

The believer must not divorce an unbeliever who consents to stay in the marriage.

One question that arises is what is meant by the word consent? In every other use of the word in the New Testament, a whole hearted agreement is implied. I believe that should be brought into this as well. It is possible for an unbeliever to agree to stay in a marriage while not giving their whole-hearted consent or agreement to the marriage. That needs to be sorted out in each individual case.

The Sanctifying Causes (v. 14)

The believing spouse has a sanctifying effect in the home. The point here is that it is important for the believer to stay in the marriage because of the sanctifying effect on the spouse and on the children. The believer can provide godly wisdom and can, as much as possible, bring the children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

The Freeing Consequences (v. 15-16)

If the unbeliever wants a divorce, the believer should grant it. The command here is on the "let leave". In other words, the believer must stop fighting the divorce. Some have argued that this *might* allow a believer to initiate a divorce when an unbeliever wants to leave or will not whole-heartedly agree to the marriage.

The believer is to allow them to leave because we are seeking to pursue peace. There is no point in waging the war. Further, the believer has no assurance that God will save the unbeliever (v.16).³ The believer is not to cling to the marriage turning marriage into an idol and banking their [H]hope in what God has not promised.

In the case of an unbeliever leaving the marriage and divorcing the believer, the believer is not bound to the marriage. They are free. They are free of its obligations. They are free to remarry.

Reflect and Respond

First, let me call those of you who hear this with growing dismay.

You were divorced and remarried before becoming a Christian. Please understand that if that was sinful in your case, that sin has been forgiven at your salvation. When you confessed Christ all your sins (even the future ones) were forgiven. Please do not carry a load of concern or guilt that is unwarranted.

As a Christian you were divorced and are now remarried and have deep concerns about your present status.

First, if God has convicted you through these texts and this sermon that you sinned either in your divorce or remarriage, ask God for forgiveness. He will forgive, cleanse of you all sin and any unrighteousness that was entailed (1 John 1:9).

Second, your current marriage is legitimate in God's eyes regardless of the circumstances at its beginning. Continue to be deeply committed to your marriage and thank God for His great grace that takes brokenness and makes it into wholeness.

As a Christian, you are divorced but not due to immorality by your former spouse. Does this mean that you are not free to remarry? The text is clear: no. Your shepherd/elder would like to sit down with you and discuss this with you.

Second, some of you may strongly disagree with this teaching. I understand that there are varying positions on this subject. Well known pastors and teachers are on both of the opposite sides. Some would say that mercy allows divorce for abuse, immorality and many other reasons and give blanket permission for remarriage. Others would say that no Christian may divorce for any reason and no remarriage may take place except to the original spouse or upon the death of the original spouse. If you disagree, please be sure that you are disagreeing with either the exegesis and can offer a clear alternative exegesis of the text. The applications we have made are only those embedded in the text itself.

Thirdly, is this harsh, unmerciful, ungracious? No. Mercy and grace, kindness to those who are sinning or suffering *cannot exceed the bounds of Scripture*. Mercy and grace require that we kindly and lovingly hold Christians to the Word of God. Anything else is not loving people as Christ loves them.

Finally, please be sure that you address your questions and concerns to your elders. We stand poised to talk, listen and weigh what you have to say.

Thank God for His grace and mercy. His work in our lives turns all our brokenness into wholeness and all for His glory.

² Some would say, in view of Deuteronomy, that she is free to remarry if her former husband does. This is not what the Deuteronomy text is allowing or forbidding: it is not allowing remarriage to the first husband upon the death of the second. While the Jewish judges had to figure all that out, we don't.

³ I am aware that this verse is often used to make the opposite argument: stay in the marriage because God may save them. This ignores the placement of the question and reverses the sense of the question.