In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul will deal with the question of what to do with mixed marriages.

What do you do when your husband, or wife, is not a Christian?

Ezra 9-10 deals with that very question. And given that so much of Paul’s interaction with the Corinthians is about how to apply the Law and the Prophets to the church in Roman society, I think we need to understand what the Law and the Prophets said about mixed marriages.

In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Moses had permitted a man to divorce his wife “because he has found some indecency in her” – a phrase that led to considerable debate in Jewish circles!

What does “indecency” mean?

Some said that it meant he could divorce her only for “sexual immorality” – others said that if she burned his dinner, he could divorce her!

But however you resolve the question of what Moses meant, it’s clear that Moses is assuming that both man and wife are part of God’s people.

And that’s where Ezra 9-10 gets interesting. Because Deuteronomy 23:2-3 said that “No one born of a forbidden union may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of his descendents may enter the assembly of the Lord. No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever.”

For Moses, the children of mixed marriages are unclean. They may not enter the assembly of the Lord – the covenant community.

The problem here in Ezra 9-10 is that the people of Israel – and even the priests and Levites – have intermarried with Ammonites, Moabites – and even the Canaanites (which was condemned in Deuteronomy 7). Egyptians are not so bad – Deuteronomy 23 allows them to enter in the third generation!

And so Ezra says that Israel must “put away” their foreign wives and children. This probably strikes us as rather extreme!

Why would God require a man to divorce his wife?
Well, if you violated a clear and direct command of God in order to marry her, then the only way to remedy that is to divorce her.

As we’ll see in 1 Cor 7, there are very few cases today
where a marriage directly violates the word of God.

Certainly if you marry your sister, then you must divorce her – that’s incest!
Or if it turns out that your wife was already married to someone else
(and that marriage was never terminated) –
then you must divorce her – that’s polyandry / polygamy.

But in the OT there were additional requirements.
God said that you must not marry a Canaanite or a Moabite.
Therefore, if you marry a Canaanite or a Moabite,
the only way to repent of your sin is to divorce her.

Of course, immediately, some of you are saying,
“but what about Rahab – the Canaanite?
What about Ruth – the Moabite?”
This is precisely why the book of Ruth is in the Bible!
The author of Ruth goes to great lengths to show that Ruth is a better Israelite
than any Israelite of her day!
Rahab and Ruth both became Israelites (by conversion)
before they married into the line of Christ.

And especially in the light of the marriage customs of the day,
it is important to note that Rahab and Ruth are both detached from their families
before they are brought into the holy line.
The marriage of Rahab into Judah does not result in a marriage alliance with Jericho!
Jericho is already a heap of ruins!
The marriage of Ruth to Boaz does not result in a marriage alliance with Moab –
she is a stranger and sojourner in Bethlehem,
who has left her family to follow Naomi.

The situation in Ezra 9-10 is very different.
Here “the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands.”
This is talking about marriage alliances between the chiefs of Israel
and the peoples who practice abominations.

If you want to think of a contemporary parallel,
it would be like me offering Lena to the son of a Tibetan Buddhist
in order to get Rex and Becca into Yushu.
Or me arranging a marriage between Robert and the daughter of a local Wiccan
in order to improve the Christian-Wiccan relations in South Bend.

That’s how dramatic a difference we’re talking about.

And when Israel realizes how far they have fallen from the purity that God commands,
they repent.
Our song of response, Psalm 130, would have been an appropriate song for that day!
Sing Psalm 130
Read 1 Corinthians 7

I have suggested that we need to see the whole of 1 Corinthians 7 in the light of the principle that Paul articulated in 6:13-14 –

“The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.” (6:13-14)

You can only understand Paul’s teaching on marriage, singleness, and divorce, if you first understand his view of the resurrection of the body.

What is the body for?
The body is not for sexual immorality.
But neither is the body for sexual pleasure.

The body – whether a married body, or a single body – is for the Lord – and the Lord for the body.

Paul’s approach to sexual ethics is a resurrection ethic.

We saw last time that in chapter 7, verse 1, it appears that they asked a question about whether a man should abstain from sexual relations with his wife.
And Paul says no!
The husband’s body belongs to his wife.
The wife’s body belongs to her husband.
So do not deprive each other – except by mutual agreement so that you can devote yourselves to prayer.

And so last time we looked at how Paul applied the resurrection of the body to marriage and singleness.

Today we turn to Paul’s application of the resurrection of the body to divorce.

**Introduction: What Does Paul Mean by “Not I, But the Lord” vs. “I, Not the Lord”?**

But first, we need to understand what Paul means when he says, “Not I, but the Lord” – and “I, not the Lord.”

When Paul says, “Not I, but the Lord” (v10) – he is saying that Jesus has already taught on this – because Jesus taught that divorce is not for “just any cause.”
But then in verse 12, he says “I, not the Lord” – because Jesus never dealt with the problem of mixed marriages.
There are two different situations in our passage:

First, there is a marriage between two Christians (verses 10-11).

In this case, Jesus has clearly taught us what we should do, and so Paul simply reiterates the teaching of Jesus.

Second, there is a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever (verses 12-16).

Jesus never said anything about this, so Paul attempts to apply the principles of God’s Word to the situation.

Some people have misunderstood what Paul is doing.

They think that the “I, not the Lord” weakens the authority of the second part of the passage.

But the effect of these two statements is to make it clear that Paul is teaching the Corinthians how to apply the Word of God.

First, we should ask:

What does Jesus say?

What do the Scriptures teach?

We need to know what the Word of God says.

But there’s a second question:

how do we apply the teaching of scripture to the situations we face day-by-day?

Should we expect an explicit Bible verse to address every situation we face?

No!

Rather, we need to learn from Paul (and the rest of the scriptures!)

how to interpret and understand the Word of God,

so that we can apply the scriptures to our everyday lives.

That’s why Paul says, “I, not the Lord.”

He’s not saying that we should ignore what he says.

He’s teaching us how to apply Jesus’ teaching to topics that Jesus never explicitly addressed.

(And by the way, this is major focus in my preaching.

I don’t want to be “the expert who gives you all the answers”!

I want to teach you how to read the scriptures, so that we – together – can be the sort of community that wisely applies the word of God to our daily lives.)

So first we look at the Lord’s charge to the Married.

1. The Lord’s Charge to the Married: Do Not Divorce (v10-11)

a. The Principle: “I Hate Divorce” says the Lord (v10, v11b)

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.
You may notice that there are two different words –
“the wife should not separate”
“the husband should not divorce” –
but under Roman law, there was no difference.

In the Roman world, divorce was common.
Paul’s contemporary Seneca remarked that many women
“reckon their years not by the number of consuls
but by the number of their husbands.” (quoted in AT 522)
In Roman law, either the husband or the wife could divorce for any reason.
All you had to do was notify your spouse that you no longer considered yourself married.
That was it.

When we read John 4,
we often think that it is shocking that the Samaritan woman had 5 husbands –
but that probably says more about us than about John’s hearers.
In the first century they would not have been shocked by the five husbands.

Now, it’s true that some Jews objected to these loose divorce practices.
And that’s the background for what Paul says, when he says,
“not I, but the Lord.”

Because in Mark 10:2-12, Jesus teaches on divorce:
“And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked,
‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’
He answered them, ‘What did Moses command you?’
They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.’
And Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.
But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female.
‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’
So they are no longer two but one flesh.
What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.’
And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.
And he said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’”

In Mark 10,
Jesus says that you shouldn’t get divorced.
But if you do get divorced, then you shouldn’t get remarried.
In fact, if you divorce and remarry, you are committing adultery.
And this fits well with what Paul says in 7:10-11.
Because Paul gives this charge (not I, but the Lord):
you shouldn’t get divorced.
But if you get divorced you shouldn’t get remarried.

Now you might say, “But wait, Jesus provided an exception!”
Well, yes, we know from Matthew 19:9
that Jesus made an exception –
“except for sexual immorality” (porneia) – the same word Paul has been using in 1 Cor.

But it’s not clear to me that Paul knew about Matthew’s gospel.
John Mark had been an associate of Paul –
and at the time of the writing of 1 Corinthians,
Luke probably hasn’t traveled through Palestine,
and so hasn’t had a chance to research his gospel yet –
so it is possible that Paul only knew of Mark’s version.

Paul’s report about the Lord’s teaching
is that the Lord says that you shouldn’t get divorced –
and if you do get divorced, then you shouldn’t get remarried
(except to be reconciled to the person you divorced).

b. The Caveat: Divorce Happens (v11a)

I want to stop for a moment and reflect on verse 11a.
“But if she does…”

I thought Jesus and Paul agreed – you should not get divorced!
But if she does…

There are situations where remaining married may, in fact, be intolerable.
And Jesus says that divorce was permitted “for your hardness of heart.”
And both Jesus and Paul say that the real problem is not divorce.
The real problem is remarriage.

I’ve seen too many cases where the church takes the view:
“We must preserve the marriage at all costs!”

Anyone who knows me knows that I am no fan of divorce.
My parents divorced when I was 13,
and it was sheer misery for everyone.

But based on the teaching of the word of God,
I cannot object to the practice of “no fault divorce” by the magistrate.

My concern is that we seem to think that if you get divorced, then you can get remarried.
Jesus’ point (and Paul’s point) is not “we must save the marriage at all costs”!
Rather, they are saying, “if the marriage is intolerable, then you can get divorced –
but you may not remarry – unless you are reconciled to the one you divorced.”

So if you are thinking that the grass might be greener on the other side –
Paul’s answer is NO WAY!
Remember that the body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body!
Jesus did not give up on his people and go find some other girl!
Yes, God divorced his people – but then he went and wooed her back!

Yes, Paul’s teaching on divorce (following the teaching of Jesus) is counter-cultural.
It runs against the grain of Jewish and Roman practice.

But the point is not that we are supposed to be “counter-cultural.”
The point is that we are for Jesus.

When you have two Christians who divorce, they should not remarry.
Rather, they should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to one another.

At first, my mother went the route of thinking that the grass was greener on the other side.
She even remarried briefly.
But by the end of her life she had come to understand what Jesus and Paul teach.

Without telling anyone, she took the diamond that he had given her,
put it in a new setting, and placed it on her right ring finger.
Shortly before she died she told me that after 20 years of chasing “greener pastures,”
she came to realize that because her body was for the Lord,
if she ever married again,
it would have to be Bill Wallace.
And when she died, that ring was so stuck to her finger that they could not remove it.

Divorce happens.
Divorce even happens in the church.
And you’ll notice that neither Paul nor Jesus ever suggests
that getting divorced fits into the category of “shall enter the kingdom of God.”
The problem comes when someone who should be seeking reconciliation
instead gets remarried to someone else –
which Jesus says is adultery.

(I would suggest that the modern category of “legal separation” fits well here.
In Roman law, there’s no difference between separation and divorce.
In American law, divorce entails the right of remarriage.
Legal separation does not.
So if a Christian finds his or her marriage to be intolerable,
legal separation would accomplish the same thing
that Paul and Jesus are talking about.)
Paul even seems to envision both parties remaining in the same church – seeking reconciliation.)

So, if you are thinking that “I could be happy with someone else” so I’ll get divorced, then you are saying “my body is for sexual immorality, not for the Lord.”

Because Jesus says that if you divorce one person to marry someone else – that’s adultery!

Except in the case of sexual immorality – as Jesus points out in Matthew 19.

What I find fascinating is that while Paul may not have known about Matthew 19, Paul winds up with a very similar application of principle to what Jesus says there.

In Matthew 19, Jesus says that in the case of “porneia” – sexual immorality – not only divorce, but also remarriage is permitted.

Here in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul deals with a different situation:

2. Paul’s Application to Mixed Marriages: God Has Called You to Peace (v12-16)
   a. If the Unbeliever Consents to Live with You, Do Not Divorce (v12-14)

   *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.

In verses 12-16, Paul applies the teaching of Jesus to mixed marriages. What do you do when a Christian is married to an unbeliever?

We usually see this in the case of a married person who becomes a Christian, but his or her spouse does not.

But we need to remember that for Paul, this will also include a Christian who is forced to marry a non-Christian.

If you are a Christian, but your father is not –
   then he probably won’t care whether you marry a Christian –
   and in fact, he may very well want you to marry an idolater, so as to draw you back to his Roman religion!

Again, if Lena’s father arranged for her to marry the son of a Tibetan Buddhist, Paul is saying that if this Buddhist consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

This word “consent” is very important!
   It could be translated very woodenly, “if it seems good together.”
   It’s the term used of Paul – or Saul of Tarsus –
when he “consented” to the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1, 22:20). It’s the term used in Romans 1:32, to speak of how people “consent” or “approve” of those who practice wicked things.

In other words, it’s a strong form of the idea of consent. If the unbeliever consents – or approves – of dwelling together, then the believer should not leave.

So, what happens if the unbelieving spouse says, “You may not go to church!”
“I don’t want you hanging around those Christians!”

That is not consent to live (or dwell) with him!

Likewise, if the unbeliever says,
“Sure I’ll stick around so that I can abuse you and make your life a living hell!”

That is not consent to live (or dwell) with her!

The body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. You belong to Jesus!

See how Paul argues in verse 14:

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.

In Ezra, the believers had to divorce their unbelieving spouses, and send away their wives and children. It seems likely that the Corinthians are asking a similar question: do we have to divorce our unbelieving spouses?

Do our children become contaminated by the uncleanness of unbelief and idolatry?

The problem in Ezra was that the unclean contaminates the clean – and so the children of mixed marriages were unclean.

But Paul says that in Christ, the holy decontaminates the unclean! The unbelieving spouse is “made holy” because of the Christian partner.

Think about what happens when Jesus touches a leper. Does the leper become a Christian? No! But the leper becomes clean!

Such was the holiness of Jesus that when he touched the unclean,
they became clean.
In the OT, the unclean contaminates the clean.
But in Jesus, the clean decontaminates the unclean!

Do you see it?
The body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.
Your body belongs to Jesus.

And just as God raised Jesus from the dead, so he will raise our bodies by his power!

His holiness now attaches to your body –
so that when your body becomes one flesh with your unbelieving spouse,
your unbelieving spouse comes into contact with the holiness of Jesus –
and thus, your children are holy.

But there’s a limit to this.
In the same way that Jesus in Matthew 19 says that remarriage is permissible
in the case of porneia – “sexual immorality” –
so also here in verses 15-16,
Paul says that remarriage is possible
in the case of the departure of the unbelieving spouse:

b. But if the Unbeliever Separates, the Brother or Sister Is Not Enslaved (v15-16)

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\[b\] 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?

Remember that in the case of Christians who separate (except for sexual immorality),
they are not to remarry – except to each other.

That’s because each of them belongs to the Lord –
and so if you both belong to the Lord and to each other –
then you can’t marry anyone else!

But when the unbeliever departs,
let them depart.

Your body belongs to the Lord – but his body doesn’t.
Your body brought the holiness of Jesus into his life –
but you don’t know whether you will save your spouse.
If the unbeliever will not consent to live together with you (the holy, Christian, you)
then you are not enslaved.

God has called you to peace – to shalom – well-being.
In the case of the two Christians who divorce in verse 11,
they are called to remain unmarried or else be reconciled to each other.
But that’s not what Paul says here.  
The implication then is clear:  
the believer is free to remarry.

What about the unbeliever?  
Unbelievers can do whatever they want!  
They’ll have to face God’s judgment at the final day –  
but what business is it of mine to judge unbelievers?

c. Marriage, Holiness, and Salvation

I want you to think about the effect of Jesus and Paul’s teaching on marriage.

In Matthew’s gospel we hear the response of the disciples:  
“If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry”! (Mt 19:10)

Think about that.  
When Jesus told his disciples that you only get to marry once,  
they replied by saying “Agh! I’ll be stuck with her! It’s better not to marry!”

And Jesus says, in effect, “Maybe so – for some of you!”

After all, if you live in a world, as they did,  
where no-fault divorce is the common practice of the culture,  
and if you live in a world where all the famous people  
are getting divorced and remarried at an astounding clip…

   oh, wait, you do live in that sort of world!...

what does this teaching do for you?

Slowly (very slowly!) it reshapes our whole concept of marriage.  
If the body is simply for pleasure –  
then if I’m not happy, I’m outta here!  
But if the body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body –  
if my body will be raised from the dead on the final day –  
and if my body is already being sanctified,  
so that in the marriage relation,  
the union of our bodies expresses something about the holiness of Jesus –  
then you should spend the whole of your married life  
seeking to practice your sanctification.

To put it simply there’s a reason why theologians call our entrance into glory the consummation.

The body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body.