

"HARD MARRIAGE? - DON'T QUIT!"

(marriage; divorce)

I Corinthians 7:10-16**January 22, 1995****Dr. Jerry Nelson www.soundliving.org**

The kids were in bed and Nora finally worked up the courage to speak to her husband Helmer.

Nora: I must take steps to educate myself. It is something I must do. That's why I'm leaving you.

Helmer: What did you say!?

Nora: If I'm to reach any understanding of myself and the things around me, I must learn to stand alone. That's why I can't stay with you any longer.

Helmer: Nora, I don't understand!

Nora: I'm leaving here at once. I dare say Kristine will put me up for tonight.

Helmer: You are out of your mind. I won't let you. I forbid you.

Nora: It's no use forbidding me anything now. I'm taking with me my own personal belongings. I don't want anything of yours, either now or later.

Helmer: This is insane!

Nora: Tomorrow I'm going home, to what used to be my home, I mean. It will be easier for me to find something to do there.

Helmer: And leave your home, your husband and your children? Don't you care what people will say?

Nora: That's no concern of mine. All I know is that this is necessary for me.

Helmer: This is outrageous, you're betraying your most sacred duty as a wife and mother.

Nora: I have another duty equally sacred, my duty to myself.

Helmer: No. First and foremost you are a wife and mother.

Nora: That I don't believe any more. I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are, or at least I'm going to be.

Helmer: Nora, I have to believe you're out of your mind.

Nora: I have never before felt so calm and collected as I do tonight.

Helmer: Calm and collected enough to leave your husband and children?

Nora: Yes.

Helmer: And you don't love me anymore?

Nora: Exactly

Helmer: Nora! you can't say that!

Nora: I not only can, I must - I don't love you anymore.

Those words were written in a novel in 1879 and they were meant to shock and shock they did.

But today, some variation on those words is recognized by millions of men and women.

How many pastors and friends and family members have heard almost exactly those same words from men and women preparing to break up their homes?

Divorce! Nobody likes it. Nobody wants it.
But what do you do when the marriage seems intolerable?

You may not have liked Nora's reasons, in the illustration, but if you have ever met a Nora you know her pain is real.

And what does God say to her when she is in a hard marriage?

And what should you think and say to your friends who are in hard marriages?

For several weeks now we have been reading, thinking and discussing the implications and applications of the book of I Corinthians to our lives.

From chapter 7 verse 1 we learn that the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth had written to the Apostle Paul asking him to respond to several specific situations - one of which was what about divorce.

As we saw last week from verse 1 apparently there were some Christians in Corinth who thought sexual abstinence was the way to greater spirituality.

They thought having sexual relations was incompatible with following Christ.

Their logic went something like this:

Abstaining from sex is the way to grow better as a Christian.

And because sex is usually associated with marriage it is better not to be married.

And therefore if you are married it is better if you get divorced.

I am not suggesting this was a cold, calculated, logical, easy issue for the Corinthian Christians.

These were people who wanted to follow Jesus and they believed their marriages got in the way.

And especially it got in the way if they were married to a non-Christian."

I suspect then, as today, the issue of divorce didn't even come to mind as long as their marriages were healthy, enjoyable and not conflicting with their personal goals.

But when the marriages became difficult then divorce was considered.

I.

The first response by Paul to the issue of divorce is to Christians who are married to Christians.

Vv 10-11 READ

I want you to notice first that Paul doesn't say, "To the Christian married to a Christian" I give this command."

So why do I say it is Christians Paul has in mind here?

Look at verse 12:

"If any brother (a Christian) has a wife who is an unbeliever"

Clearly this section as we will see in a few minutes is dealing with Christians married to non-Christians.

Look at the first part of verse 12: "To the rest I say".

If "the rest, the ones not spoken to yet are Christians married to non-Christians, who must Paul have been speaking to in verse 10-11?

Since he is writing to the Christians in Corinth he must here have in mind the Christians married to Christians.

And what is the basic biblical ethic, the fundamental moral principle which Paul states?

Look at the end of verse 10: "A wife must not separate from her husband"

Look also at the end of verse 11: "And a husband must not divorce his wife."

Two things I want you to bear in mind throughout this entire passage:

First: "What's good for the goose is good for the gander".

In other words, Paul immediately breaks down any idea of a double standard - one standard for women and another for men.

What is wrong for one gender is equally wrong for the other. It is not less wrong for a man to leave his family than for a woman to do so.

Secondly: notice that while three different words are used to describe it - all three words are referring to the same action.

v 10 "a wife must not separate from her husband."

v 11 "and a husband must not divorce his wife."

v 15 "if the unbeliever leaves..."

Today we speak of desertion as different than legal separation and both of them as different than legal divorce.

There is no such intended difference in the way these words are used here. They are interchangeable by definition.

The text is not saying a husband can't divorce but could separate while a wife can't even separate.

In all three cases we aren't talking about technicalities but about a marriage being over, dissolving a covenant relationship.

All three words are addressing the same issue.

And what is the basic command?

Christian don't divorce your Christian spouse.

That idea has been consistent through Scripture and when Paul says, "Not I, but the Lord" he doesn't mean that if he had said it, it wouldn't be authoritative but that Jesus did speak specifically to this very issue.

Notice in verse 12 where Paul writes,

"To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)"?

What Paul means there is not that this instruction is less authoritative but that Jesus didn't specifically address the issue of vs 12.

But in verses 10-11 Paul is saying, "Jesus did specifically address the issue of a believer divorcing a believer."

All three of the Gospel writers quote Jesus on this subject of divorce.

I want you to turn to Matthew 19 because there you will find the longest quote on the subject.

Look at verse 3 (Matt 19): READ

The issue is divorce and specifically the issue is, "On what basis may a divorce be permitted?"

First of all Jesus reiterates God's intentions regarding marriage but the questioners press him and so Jesus gives the basic principle once again: READ v 9

Set aside the exception clause for a minute and what is the basic command?

In answer to the question, "Is it lawful for a person to divorce his spouse?" what is the basic answer? NO

We will come back to the issue of the exception noted here, a little later but right now I wanted you to see that Paul in I Cor 7 is saying that his instruction on this matter of divorce is consistent with the very words of Jesus himself.

Let's go back now to I Cor 7 and note that Paul only lays down the basic principle. He doesn't speak to exceptions here.

Someone may well ask "What if my believing spouse commits adultery?"

"What if my believing spouse deserts me?"

While we will address those issues later, I want you to note that Paul doesn't do so here.

That doesn't mean there are no exceptions in the case of a believer married to a believer but that that is not Paul's issue here.

Remember Paul is addressing the specific occasion presented to him:
They were apparently asking if in their desire to abstain from sex it would be permissible to divorce their Christian spouses.

And Paul's response to this particular situation was the same as Jesus' response to another situation - Don't divorce your Christian spouse!

Look now to verse 11.

In pastoral fashion, Paul addresses the issue of the Christian who has already divorced his or her Christian spouse.

What if they've already done it?

Divorce is not an unpardonable sin. It is serious but it is not unforgivable. On the basis of Christ's death for sin and upon genuine repentance forgiveness is granted.

But Paul writes, to the Christian who has divorced his or her Christian spouse there are two options open:

Remain unmarried or be reconciled.

What would Paul's answer have been to the Christian who turned right around and asked,

"Now that I've already divorced my Christian spouse can I marry someone else?"

What did Paul write: "Remain unmarried or be reconciled."

I think that answer is quite clear.

But what if reconciliation is not possible?

What if the Christian realizes they have sinned by divorcing their Christian spouse and now they wish to be reconciled, remarried but the Christian spouse refuses or the Christian spouse has already remarried?

Paul does not specifically respond to that situation so we will have to get our answer from some other text or implication of Scripture.

Another question?

Since Paul in verses 10-11 is addressing the situation of a Christian married to another Christian, and he says don't get a divorce, does he mean it is never permissible for a believer to divorce a believer? Again, I would have to say, Paul doesn't specifically address that issue here.

Some might say Paul has addressed that issue here and he allows no exceptions when it is a believer married to another believer .

But I would ask you to remember that Paul specifically says that Jesus spoke to this issue.

And Jesus was speaking to believers, God's people.

And it would be unreasonable to think that Paul didn't know of the exception Jesus made.

Again then we have to infer that these verses don't prohibit any exceptions - they just don't address any exceptions.

But again what is Paul saying?

Christian, even the most spiritual sounding reasons, even the loftiest sounding intentions, don't give you the right to break the marriage covenant.

It may be a hard marriage, but your relationship to Jesus Christ is not going to be better by leaving your spouse.

God's command: Christian, are you married to a Christian? Stay as you are.

II.

Now let's look at the second part of the passage: verses 12-16

As we saw earlier, this instruction is the Christian who is married to an unbeliever.

Note that in verse 12 Paul in essence says, the following instruction is from him not the Lord.

What does that mean? Remember earlier I said that Jesus had specifically addressed the situation of a believer married to another believer?

What Paul is saying here is that Jesus had not specifically addressed this issue of a believer married to an unbeliever.

This does not mean that Paul's words are less authoritative.

The Corinthian logic probably went something like this:

"Yes, after reading verses 10-11 we would have to agree with Paul that believers are not supposed to divorce believers but what about when a believer is married to an unbeliever?

"Surely, Jesus' and Paul's words can't apply to that situation. We remember Paul's words in chapter 6 where he told us that our very bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit of God and we should not unite our bodies with unbelievers.

"Surely being married to an unbeliever contaminates our Christianity."

But what is Paul's response?

Verses 12/13: READ

Don't divorce them!

To see that this idea of spiritual contamination was probably part of the Corinthian reasoning look at verse 14: READ

Paul is saying, "Not only is your spiritual life not contaminated by your unbelieving spouse but the truth is that your unbelieving spouse is sanctified by you."

Paul does not mean the unbeliever is saved by being married to a believer but that the unbeliever is in a position to be influenced.

Compared to other unbelievers the unbelieving spouse of a believer is in a unique place - a place where they have before them always the witness of a life committed to Jesus.

No, you aren't contaminated by them, to the contrary, they are blessed by you.

Look at verse 16 for a minute: READ

There is no guarantee here but there is the positive implication that a believer's presence in an unbelieving spouse's life may be just what God will use to bring that person to saving faith in Christ.

Question: Does this mean a believer should marry a non-Christian so that they can be led to the Lord?

Would that be called "missionary marriage"?

Intermarriage between believers and unbelievers is roundly condemned throughout Scripture and even here in v 39 the stipulation for the remarriage of a widow is that the person she marries must belong to the Lord - be a true Christian.

These words of Paul were written to people who became believers after they were married and then wondered about remaining married to their unbelieving spouse.

And what about your children?

Look at the last part of verse 14 where Paul writes, "Otherwise".

In other words Paul is writing, "If I argued like you think, that you are contaminated by an unbelieving spouse then your children would likewise be unclean, unfit for God, outside of the place of God's help.

But "as it is" or "if you think like it truly is" that the unbeliever is sanctified by the believing spouse then your children are not unclean but are holy - or likewise sanctified - in the place where they can be influenced for God.

No, being married to an unbeliever doesn't put you or your children outside of God's help.

No, being married to an unbeliever doesn't mean your Christian growth must be stunted or that you won't be able to follow Christ.

"Remain as you are - Don't think that changing your circumstances will better your spiritual life.

Let's go back to verse 15.

What if the unbelieving spouse won't stay in the marriage?

What is the believer to do if the unbelieving spouse says they want out?

What is Paul's instruction: Let them go.

In that culture as in our own until recently, at least a man and sometimes even a woman could make divorce even messier than it is by fighting it tooth and nail.

Paul is saying, don't do that.

You're not obligated and in fact you're not permitted to fight them.

Or as he says at the end of the verse: "God has called us to live in peace."

Don't take that as a basis for seeking a divorce.

Paul is using it as a reason for not resisting a divorce in an ungodly fashion.

He doesn't mean you can't try to talk them out of the divorce but he does mean you are not to use unreasonable and ungodly methods to try to force them to stay. "Let them go."

The second sentence in that verse is interesting:

"A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances".

The words Paul uses are "not bound" which are literally, "not enslaved".

In the immediate context it seems that it at least means the believer is not obligated to keep fighting to keep the marriage if the unbeliever is intent upon leaving it.

I think it further means the believer is truly unmarried at that point. The unbeliever breaks the covenant meaning there is no covenant remaining.

The believer is not enslaved to a non-existent covenant. Some would say Paul means the believer is free to remarry.

While it is possible that is a legitimate implication of the sentence, that is not what he says.

Or as in vv 10-11, so here, Paul is just not addressing that issue of remarriage.

What he does say is that if an unbelieving spouse wants to break the covenant of marriage - the believer is not required to stop it and in fact for the sake of peace should let them go.

Let's review what Paul here says:

We start with the theme of the chapter: "Remain as you are." Don't think changing your marital circumstances will help you spiritually.

If you are a believer married to another believer, don't divorce - "Remain as you are".

And if you have or do divorce your believing spouse then remain unmarried (don't marry another) or else be reconciled.

And if you are a believer married to an unbeliever, don't divorce - "Remain as you are."

Remember their unbelief is no excuse for divorcing them but to the contrary, your belief sanctifies them and the children.

But if they leave, let them go.

You're not enslaved so as to stay with them - be at peace.

Basic teaching: "Remain as you are."

For 95% of us, given the circumstances of our marriages, these instructions from I Corinthians are sufficient.

We know God's will regarding our marriage and all we have to do then is obey it.

Your marriage may not be all you had hoped it would be but whether your spouse is a believer or an unbeliever the command of God is clear. Don't divorce.

But what about all the questions we have raised along the way this morning that this passage doesn't address?

What about the 5% of you who are not just in hard marriages but impossible ones?

What about your advice to friends and family who are in relationships where the covenant has been broken by adultery or desertion?

According to God's word, under what circumstances is divorce permitted?

There are two circumstances quite specifically stated:

One we looked at today in I Cor 7:15.

The specific situation mentioned is when an unbeliever deserts a believer.

If the unbeliever won't stay in the marriage, the believer is not required to force it.

What I will say next I do not say by the authority of specific words from the Bible but I do say them by way of what I think is reasonable application of the implications of the words of the Bible.

The marriage covenant between a believer and an unbeliever is no less binding in God's eyes than the marriage covenant between a believer and a believer.

And since it is the desertion of one partner by the other and not the mixed marriage, that occasions the divorce in I Cor 7:15, it seems reasonable to conclude that the same principle would apply to a marriage between two believers.

If one of the believers refuses to stay in the marriage the other believer is not obligated to force it.

So what circumstances bring about a divorce?

When one partner "leaves" - will not stay in the marriage.

But there is another circumstance under which divorce is permitted according to the words of Jesus.

Look again at Matthew 19:9

We saw it earlier: Jesus said no divorce "except".

Except what? "Except for marital unfaithfulness".

Those words in the NIV translate Greek words which are literally, "Except for sexual sins."

It is almost universally agreed that "sexual sins" in the context of marriage means any sexual relations outside of the marriage - or what we otherwise call "adultery".

Back in Genesis 2 there is a statement quoted both by Jesus and by Paul that defines a marriage covenant:

You'll see it in Matthew 19:5.

I want you to notice there are really two elements of the definition:

The first is "leaving" and "cleaving"

I see leaving and cleaving as two sides of the same issue:

This is a changing of one's foremost loyalties FROM any others including parents TO one's spouse.

Isn't it at least interesting that the exception Paul makes to no divorce in I Cor 7 picks up on this issue of cleaving.

If your spouse won't abide by this element of the covenant relationship - won't cleave then the marriage is over.

The second part of the definition of the marriage covenant is "and the two shall become one flesh."

It has always been understood that this refers to the sexual union.

Isn't it at least interesting that the exception that Jesus makes to no divorce in Matthew 19 picks up on this issue of "one flesh".

When a spouse has sexual relations with anyone other than his or her spouse, they break the "one flesh" element of the marriage covenant.

Two circumstances break the marriage covenant:

"Leaving" which destroys the "cleaving" AND
"adultery" which destroys the "one flesh".

Now for the equally or even more difficult question: Under what circumstances is marriage to a second person permitted?

Verse 39 makes it clear that a widow may not marry an unbeliever.

Verses 10-11 seemed to make clear that a believer was not free to divorce a believing spouse and then marry another person.

But Verse 39 makes it clear that remarriage is a possibility under certain circumstances: READ

My point is that a second marriage is not always prohibited.

But the big question in our day is whether a divorced person is biblically permitted to be married to another.

What I am going to say next I do not say with the authority of explicit statements of Scripture.

But as I mentioned before, I do say it with a studied and corroborated review of the implications of the statements of Scripture.

We know from other historical sources and by inference from the Bible that the cultures of Moses' day, and of Jesus' day and Paul's day all assumed and allowed remarriage after divorce.

In the Old Testament we see that remarriage after divorce is so assumed that all the laws regarding it applied to the exception not to the rule.

For example in Deut 24 Moses only notes the circumstances under which remarriage was not permitted.

Likewise when we come to I Cor 7:10-11 Paul notes the exception: If a believer divorces a believer they are not permitted to marry another.

If remarriage was customary in those days, and I think few if any would dispute that, and if remarriage was the major issue of sin in Jesus' and Paul's thinking then it is curious to the point of illogical that Jesus didn't specifically say that all remarriage after divorce was forbidden.

Instead what Jesus said was divorce and remarriage are wrong "except".

Grammarians tell us that Jesus placed his exception clause in his sentence in exactly the right place to modify both the verbs "divorce" and "remarries".

The clear implication is that when the exception is the particular circumstance (that is for example, when the wife has committed adultery) then neither divorce nor remarriage is wrong in the case of the husband and vice versa.

And my personal conviction is that the principle applies not only to when the "one-flesh" element of the marriage covenant is broken by adultery but applies also to when the "cleaving-loyalty" element of the marriage covenant is broken by "leaving".

I believe that, biblically, remarriage is assumed and permitted when a Christian's spouse breaks the marriage covenant.

I close with reminding you of what you already know, that this message and this particular biblical text do not speak to some of the concerns that some of you have about divorce and remarriage.

I am quick to point out that the principles given in the Scriptures do not always apply easily or understandably to every situation.

There are some situations that are so difficult and complicated as to defy reason and solution.

In those situations I believe we must come before God asking for wisdom and grace.

I further believe we must be non-judgmental in those situations to which the Scriptures do not speak AND we must often be forgiving in those situations where it does.

But I want to leave you with the thrust of Paul's command:

Christian don't divorce your spouse. Remain as you are.

Changing your marital status won't make you a better Christian.