

**DON'T QUIT!"**  
**I Corinthians 7:10-16**

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

Nora: I'm leaving you.

Helmer: Nora, I don't understand!

Nora: I'm leaving here 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: You would 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 that 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: 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 Christian friends who are in hard marriages?

During this month of June I have been speaking to the issue of marriage. I began on the 7<sup>th</sup> by urging that we once again "honor" marriage in this culture, in the way God commanded in Hebrews 13:4.

I continued last week by urging that we counter the trend of people living together without marriage by demonstrating what an expensive counterfeit it is.

Today I want to pick up on a theme I introduced in that first message - the issue of divorce.

I want to once again remind us of the basics God has stated so clearly.

I want to say to those who are considering divorce - "For God's sake and your own, don't do it!"

Even though I will later speak to situations in which I think God allows divorce, I want you to understand that I do not have time to discuss all the seemingly impossible marriage-situations people find themselves in today.

My purpose is to simply once again hold up the standard of marriage being one man and one woman in a covenant relationship for life.

The primary passage of Scripture I want you to see this morning is found in I Corinthians 7.

The Apostle Paul was writing to the people of the church in the Greek city of Corinth.

They had asked Paul some specific questions, one of which was on this subject of divorce.

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.

Through the Apostle Paul, this is God's response: READ I Cor 7:10-15

In this passage Paul addresses two groups of people:

First of all he speaks to the Christian who is married to a Christian and is thinking of getting divorced.

Secondly he speaks to the Christian who is married to a non-Christian and is thinking of divorcing them.

The first response by Paul in verses 10-11 is to Christians who are married to Christians. In verse 12 and following he will deal with Christians who are married to non-Christians.

#### Vv 10-11 READ

“To the married I give this command (not I but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.”

And what is **the basic biblical ethic**, the fundamental moral principle which God through Paul states **regarding divorce**?

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 two different words are used to describe it - both 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."

Both words are addressing the same issue - divorce - the dissolution of a marriage.

And again, 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 spoke specifically to this very issue.

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

Matthew 19:3 "Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked,  
'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'"

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

First of all in verses 4-6 Jesus reiterates God's intentions regarding marriage.

Matthew 19:4-6 "Haven't you read, Jesus replied, that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, 'For this cause a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?' Therefore what God has joined together let man not separate."

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

We will come back to the issue of the exceptions 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 yet ("What if my Christian spouse commits adultery?", "What if my Christian spouse deserts me?").

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 first issue.

His first concern was to lay down the same basic principle Jesus had stated - A Christian ought not to divorce a 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.

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.

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

Remain unmarried or be reconciled.

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?

We'll look at that a little later.

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?

Certainly he was aware of the exception Jesus made, in the case of adultery, but Paul has not yet addressed exceptions - he wants to lay down the basic principle.

So again what is the basic biblical principle?

Christian, even the most spiritual reasons, even the loftiest 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 12-15

As we saw earlier, while verses 10-11 were written about two Christians who are married to each other, this instruction, in verses 12-15 is specifically addressed to 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 Corinthians might have been thinking something like this:

"Yes, after reading verses 10-11 we would have to agree with Paul that Jesus taught 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.

But what is Paul's response?

Verses 12-13:

I Corinthians 7:12-13 "To the rest I say this, (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is **not** a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him."

What is the basic principle once again? "Don't divorce!"

Do you remember the question that was asked of Jesus?

Matthew 19:3 "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

It seems we have come to that place in our culture - people are seeking divorce for many reasons.

I'm not suggesting people come easily to the decision to divorce but there can be no denying that divorce is more common even among Christians.

We have found more and more "reasons" for being the exception to the basic principle.

So as Paul did, it is necessary to once again state that basic principle - If you are married to either a Christian or a non-Christian, stay married!

Let's review what Paul here says:

Verses 10-11: If you are a believer married to another believer, don't divorce.

And if you already have divorced your believing spouse then remain unmarried (don't marry another) or else be reconciled to that believing spouse.

And in verses 12-15, if you are a believer married to an unbeliever, don't divorce.

Remember their unbelief is no excuse for divorcing them.

But if they leave, if they divorce you, let them go.

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

Basic teaching: "Don't divorce."

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 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 directly address?

And what about the 5% of people who are not just in hard marriages but seemingly impossible ones?

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

There are two circumstances quite specifically addressed in the Bible:  
One is in this text.

What if you are married to an unbelieving spouse and they want out?

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

What is Paul's instruction: Let them go.

I Corinthians 7:15 "But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace."

In that culture, as in our own until recently, a person could make divorce even messier than it already is, by fighting it tooth and nail.

Paul is saying, don't do that.

You're not obligated and in fact it is not right to fight them.

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

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".

I think it means the believer is truly no longer married at that point.

The unbeliever breaks the covenant meaning there is no covenant remaining.

There are some who teach today that once you are married you are, in God's eyes, always married even if the other person divorces you and marries another.

But I think Paul is very clear, the believer is not enslaved to a non-existent covenant.

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 permitted 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 biblically permitted 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:

We already saw it in Matthew 19:5.

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

The first is "separating from the past" and "uniting to your spouse"

I see leaving and uniting 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 uniting.

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

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

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

Isn't it 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:

When a spouse leaves destroying the "uniting" AND when a spouse commits "adultery" destroying the "one flesh".

Are there other circumstances that allow for divorce?

What about abuse or obsession with pornography? - just to name two.

I believe there are ways to deal with those situations and still obey God's commands regarding marriage.

Now for the equally difficult question:

**Under what circumstances is marriage to a second person permitted?**

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

But look at verse 39 where Paul makes it equally clear that a second marriage is a possibility under certain circumstances:

I Corinthians 7:39 "A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord."

My point is that another marriage is not always prohibited.

But the big question in our day is whether a divorced person (not just a widowed 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 I do believe they are wholly **implicit** in the Scriptures.

We know from other historical sources and by inference from the Bible that the cultures of Moses' day, as well as Jesus' 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 remarriage applied to the exceptions not to the rule.

For example in Deut 24 Moses only notes the circumstances under which remarriage was not permitted - certainly implying that otherwise remarriages ARE permitted.

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

If remarriage was customary in those days, and remarriage is what Jesus and Paul wanted to stop, then it is curious to the point of illogical that Jesus didn't specifically say that all remarriage after divorce is forbidden.

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

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 applies (that is for example, when the wife or husband has committed adultery) then neither divorce nor remarriage are wrong.

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 "uniting" element of the marriage covenant is broken by "leaving".

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

Even though I have taken the last few minutes to address the issues of exceptions where divorce is permitted and where remarriage is permitted - I want to conclude by reiterating the major point of the passage - Stay married!

In a day when divorce is sought for so many reasons it is needful to be reminded of God's intention and command:

“What God has joined together let not man separate.”

I realize that not all Christians have honored God's commands regarding their marriages.

You may be one who has violated God's standards in this area of life.

Before you leave here this morning please remember the grace of God to forgive and restore.

We must never use the grace of God as an excuse to sin such as the time a woman asked me in all seriousness, “If I divorce my husband and then ask God's forgiveness - he has to forgive me, right?”

Never are we to presume upon the grace of God to allow ourselves to sin.

BUT if we have sinned and are willing to confess it for the sin that it is - we can know that the grace of God is sufficient to wholly forgive us.

Are you married? Don't quit! Marriage is to be honored by all.