

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 (Between A Believer And An Unbeliever)

January 25th, 2015

1 Corinthians 7:12-16

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7:12; that's on page 955 in your pew Bible. Before we get going I want to acknowledge that we are working through a difficult text. I saw that on your faces last Sunday and I read it in your emails and letters. I know this is hard. When professed believers in Jesus Christ face a hard text in the Bible they have always had but 3 options.

1. Change it.
2. Ignore it.
3. Pray really hard so as to obey it.

Those are the only options. Every Christian church within 10,000 miles of this place has adopted one of those 3 approaches with respect to the several hard texts within Scripture. You can find all three approaches in our tiny little town. There are churches in this town who when they read a hard text in the Bible, simply change it. They have very complicated methods of reading, they have cultural out clauses and relativizing strategies that allow them to say that a text can mean the exact opposite of what it says. That's why there are churches in this town who can hire openly lesbian pastors even though the Bible condemns homosexuality and says that a pastor must be the

husband of one wife. They've just made those texts mean something other than what they obviously say.

There are also churches in this town as in every other who simply ignore difficult texts. They don't teach on them and they simply operate as though they don't exist. Sometimes this is called "the third way". They don't deny the texts, they just don't address the texts.

Lastly, in this town, as in many others there are Christians who when they come to a hard text in Scripture simply wrestle with it, so as to understand what it is saying and then they bow before it. And they pray to God: "O God, increase our faith! Help us to obey what we have seen". And this is the one to whom God will look. To the humble, to the contrite in spirit who trembles at God's Word. (Isaiah 66:2). That is the church that we're trying to be, this morning and every morning. We don't always get it right, I'm sure, but we are not going to skip these things, and by God, we are not going to lie to ourselves about these things. This topic may be hard to deal with. But this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

My plan this morning is to walk very slowly through the text, dividing it as we go. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

Reading And Understanding The Text:

To the rest I say (1 Corinthians 7:12 ESV)

1. To the rest...

The first thing we need to understand as we read this text is the identity of "the rest". We remember from last week that Paul has given some teaching on the matter of divorce among believers. Paul says that divorce between two actual born again, Spirit-filled, Bible submitting Christians is virtually inconceivable. It really shouldn't ever happen. That's the general rule. Christians should not divorce other Christians. However, not all marriages in the church fit under that category. John Calvin is helpful here, he says:

By *the rest* he means those who are exceptions, so that the law, common to others, is not applicable to them; for an unequal marriage is on a different footing, when married persons differ among themselves in respect of religion¹

Obviously the rules about marriage and divorce given in verses 10-11 won't apply here, Calvin says. Its one thing to say to two Christians, "You must hold to each other through thick and thin, good times and bad, drawing upon the resources of the Holy Spirit to change and grow and forgive and you must never give up and you must never let go." But in the case of the believer married to an unbeliever such counsel has no value. Their marriage can be dissolved simply by the unbeliever walking away. He is under no such compulsions. He is not benefitting from these graces we have spoken of. This is a totally different case. We must not have a wooden "one size fits all" approach to marriage and divorce. There are different cases, and as we see in this passage, there are different laws for different cases. Thanks be to God!

The text goes on to say:

To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) (1 Corinthians 7:12 ESV)

2. I, not the Lord...

What in the world does Paul mean when he says, "I, not the Lord"? Some seize on this remark to suggest that there are in fact layers of authority within the Bible. The Red Letters are authoritative in a different way than the black letters. These folks say that Paul is treating his own counsel as less authoritative than the counsel of Jesus. But that is not at all what is happening here. Last week we saw that Paul was able to answer their question simply by referencing a recorded teaching of Jesus. That's why he began verse 10 by saying:

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

Jesus spoke about the issue of divorce within the covenant community. However, Jesus never addressed the topic of divorce between one member of the covenant community and an outsider. That situation never arose in his ministry so he never taught on it. However, the fact that Jesus never got to this topic is not a cause for great concern. Jesus himself said:

¹John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), n.p.

¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:12–14 ESV)

Jesus said that he had plenty of things to teach his church but he would not be giving the rest of that teaching in person, he would be giving it via the Holy Spirit through the mouths of the Apostles. The Holy Spirit will take from Jesus, give it to the Apostles and they will speak to the church on Christ’s behalf. That is why Peter could speak of the letters of the Apostle Paul as “scripture”.

¹⁵ just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, **as they do the other Scriptures.** (2 Peter 3:15–16 ESV)

Peter understood the letters of Paul to be Scripture. They were equal in authority to the Old Testament Scriptures because they were written by the Spirit of Christ. I, not the Lord, simply means that Paul is not quoting a text from Jesus, but he is speaking by the Spirit of Jesus and therefore the words come with equal authority.

The text goes on to say:

if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. (1 Corinthians 7:12 ESV)

3. He should not divorce her...

Again, a little bit of reverse engineering helps us figure out the question that Paul is responding to. NT scholars reconstruct the scenario this way:

Since Paul is responding to the letter the Corinthians wrote him in response to his warning to them about not associating with sexually immoral people (1 Cor. 5:9-10), some may have been concerned that sexual relations with unbelieving (and thus presumably sexually immoral) spouses were illegitimate (and perhaps fell under the category of “touching”; see on 7:1), leading them to wonder if they should refrain from sexual relations with, or even divorce, those spouses.²

Again, let us refer back to our analogy from last week about pagan Bob and Sue. Pagan Bob and Sue got married but let us suppose this time that only Sue came to faith in Christ. Bob is still a

²Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 295.

pagan and behaving sexually as pagans do. Christian Sue may have wondered whether it was still appropriate for her to have sex with her husband – might she not be defiled? Might she not be “sharing” in whatever filth and debauchery he has given himself to? Should she divorce him so as to avoid contamination? That was the question. Paul’s answer is a surprising “No.” The Christian should not initiate the divorce. If Bob consents to live with you as a husband, despite your Christian faith, then so be it, he says. Continue to be as a wife should be to Bob.

Now, we do need to discuss what is meant by the phrase “consents to live with”. Some take this phrase to mean simply “contents to live with” meaning Bob carries on with his pagan sexual indulgences and Sue suffers through it in hopes of Bob’s eventual conversion. That may be exactly what is meant here. However, some honest Bible readers take it to mean that if Bob consents to live with Sue according to the Christian understanding of marriage, she should not divorce him. Meaning that Bob learns of Sue’s convictions regarding marriage and, though not a believer, consents to live with her in that fashion. I.e. he agrees to exclusive monogamy. The testimony of the early church seems to indicate that they held a position that is carefully between those two options. There is a story about a Christian woman in the early church who came to Christ out of paganism and found herself married to an unbeliever. The story is told by Justin in his *Second Apology*. The woman tried to get her husband to commit to a monogamous marriage and to cease from his immoralities. He refused. Her Christian community advised her to stay in the marriage in hopes of winning her husband to Christ. Her husband however, continued to progress in his debauchery such that in the end, she did divorce him. Upon this, her husband turned her into the authorities for her Christian faith.³ What that story seems to indicate is that the Christian spouse tried to convince the unbelieving partner to engage in a monogamous marriage; she tried to get him to consent to live with her as in a real marriage, but upon his stubborn refusal to do so, after considerable effort was made, she was permitted to divorce him. In that sense, his stubborn refusal to live with her in a real marriage, was understood as “initiating the divorce”. I think that is a careful, honest, historical and appropriate application of this principle. The Christian spouse should not seek the divorce. She or he should ask the unbeliever to live with them in a real marriage. If the unbeliever is willing then the marriage should stay in tact. If the unbeliever is unwilling then the marriage may be dissolved.

³ Justin’s *Second Apology*, as related in Ciampa and Rosner page 296.

Next, the text goes on to say:

For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. (1 Corinthians 7:14 ESV)

4. The unbelieving spouse is made holy...

What is meant by this phrase? Obviously it does not mean that the unbelieving spouse is made a Christian, Paul goes on to hold out this as a hope to be worked towards, not a certain reality in verse 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? (1 Corinthians 7:16 ESV)

That's a hope, not a given, so what does Paul mean in verse 14 by the unbelieving spouse being made holy? This is one of those cultural idioms that I mentioned a few weeks ago. The Bible has plenty of phrases that made perfect sense to people hearing them in the original context 2000 years ago but that make very little sense to us now. If you write in an email that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, whoever is receiving that email today will understand it perfectly. If anyone reads that email 2000 years from now, who speaks another language than English, they will have absolutely no idea what you are talking about. That's a cultural idiom. We seem to be dealing with one here. In Paul's day it was often said, particularly by Jews, that in marriage a man sanctified his wife to himself. We catch a glimpse of that idiom again in Ephesians 5. In his book "Jewish Laws On Illicit Marriage" Yonder Gillihan writes that "The rabbis assumed that the act of betrothal, or 'sanctification', implied the licitness of the marital union"⁴. Meaning simply that the official betrothal made the marital act "licit" or lawful; it was sanctified. Thus Paul seems to be saying simply that the believer can engage in lawful sex with the unbelieving spouse without fear of defilement. He is saying simply that the holiness in you is sufficient to protect you from the defilement in them. Who they are will not impact who you are with respect to your relationship to the Lord. That's pastoral counsel. This is taught all throughout the New Testament. When Jesus touched people who were unclean, like the woman with the issue of blood or like the dead son of the widow from Nain, he did not become unclean, they became clean. His holiness overpowered their cursedness. The blessing travelled down, the curse did not

⁴ Yonder Gillihan, Jewish Laws On Illicit Marriage as cited in Ciampa and Rosner.

travel up. Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world. You have the Spirit of Christ in you crying Abba Father. That cannot be drowned out by the cries of your spouse's guilt and sin. That's all he's saying. Paul puts it more succinctly in Titus 1:

To the pure, all things are pure (Titus 1:15 ESV)

Paul is saying to the Christian spouse, you may and you should continue to have marital intimacy with your unbelieving husband. He will be blessed but you will not be defiled.

Now, before we move on here, we need to make an important point of clarification. All of this teaching relates to a person who gets saved in an existing marriage to a pagan. None of this applies to a believer who foolishly and sinfully marries an unbeliever. Just to be clear. Calvin said:

Let us, however, bear in mind, that **he speaks here not of contracting marriages, but of maintaining those that have been already contracted**; for where the matter under consideration is, whether one should marry an unbelieving wife, or whether one should marry an unbelieving husband, then that exhortation is in point — Be not yoked with unbelievers, for there is no agreement between Christ and Belial. (2 Corinthians 6:14.) But he that is already bound has no longer liberty of choice; hence the advice given is different.⁵

The Bible is very clear that believers should under no circumstance enter into marriage contract with unbelievers. The Apostle Paul says that in 2 Corinthians 6:14 as Calvin quoted above and he also says it later in this same chapter. In verse 39 he 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**. (1 Corinthians 7:39 ESV)

So, to be clear, all of what we've just said about the unbeliever being blessed rather than the believer defiled, and seeking and hoping for his conversion, applies to the maintenance of an EXISTING marriage and is not to be taken as permission to engage in missionary dating.

Believers can only marry believers and therefore believers should only date believers. For a believer to marry an unbeliever is sinful – that's in the Bible. For her to date one, therefore, is stupid, pointless and dangerous. That's a reasonable inference.

⁵John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), n.p.

Next we see in the text:

Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. (1 Corinthians 7:14 ESV)

5. Your children are holy...

What is meant by that? Again, it doesn't mean that your children are automatically saved any more than it meant that the unbelieving spouse is automatically saved. That is still a thing to be hoped for not a thing to be assumed. Again, there is a Jewish cultural background to this saying. In Judaism the rabbis taught that the status of the lesser party in a marriage was conveyed to the child at birth. If a righteous Jew married an unrighteous Gentile, then the child born to them was an unrighteous Gentile. The Talmud says that in:

“any situation in which there is a valid betrothal, but there also is the commission of a transgression, the offspring follows the status of the impaired (inferior) party.... This is a man who had sexual relations with any of those women prohibited to him by the Torah.”⁶

In a church where Jewish converts mingled with Gentile converts this question was sure to come up. The Jewish Christians may have said to the Gentile Christians that if they persisted in their marriages to unbelieving, sexually immoral Gentiles, any children born of that union would be illicit and unclean. Paul is correcting that wrong view. “Far from it”, he says kindly, “your children are welcome; they are privileged in the House of God.” You have to remember that Christians are taught to assume that God means to save their children. The very first Christian sermon contained that encouragement. Peter preached a Gospel sermon on Pentecost and many people were deeply convicted. They asked Peter what they should do and he said:

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”³⁹ **For the promise is for you and for your children** and for all who are far off, **everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.**” (Acts 2:38–39 ESV)

Christians have always believed that we are to assume our children are the objects of God's redeeming grace. Listen to me, if you are a believer and you love Jesus and you love the word of God and God has a soul in mind, he has a baby about to be born that he desires to call to himself and gloriously save, where do you think he will put that baby? He will put that baby into the home of a believer so that baby can hear the Gospel and see it lived out in the life of a Christian

⁶ *The Babylonian Talmud, Qiddushin*, translated by Jacob Neusner (Peabody: Hendrikson Publishers, 2005), 322.

adult. You should assume that the reason you have the children that you have is because God wants them to be saved. Now, some will show themselves to be unregenerate – unsaved – by walking away; by not abiding in the teaching of Christ. But, it is logical and efficient and **BIBLICAL** to assume that the most likely candidates for God’s electing grace in this city are in fact the children born to the believers in this city. You want to fish where the fish are and the most likely place to find them is in our own homes. That is what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 7. He is saying to a Christian woman married to an unbeliever: “Do not despair. Hope for the salvation of your child. God gave him to you. He is not defiled by his father, though he may be saved by you.”

Of course we preach the Gospel to all, freely in hopes of their salvation, but we preach it loudest, and we preach it most frequently and with the greatest hope of help from God when we preach it to our children. That is true when both parents are saved and it is true no less when only one parent is saved. That’s what Paul is saying in verse 14.

In verse 15 he says:

But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. (1 Corinthians 7:15 ESV)

6. Let it be so...

It takes more than one person to keep a marriage together. A marriage is two people holding on to each other through thick and thin. To do that requires faith in Christ, help from the Spirit and grace and mercy from God Almighty. If you’re married to an unbeliever it just might not work out. If they let go, then you are free. Let it be so. Don’t fight it. Jay Adams teaches on this passage saying:

“The permissive imperative, ‘Let him depart’ applies to any case in which the unbeliever no longer wishes or agrees to live with the believer – regardless of what that reason may be, so long as the believer has not provoked him/her to it instead of trying to hold the marriage together.”⁷

The Bible does not counsel people to stay in impossible scenarios. You shouldn’t be the one to pull the plug, but if the other party pulls the plug, you don’t need to go down with the ship. Let it

⁷ Jay E. Adams, Marriage, Divorce, And Remarriage In The Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 47.

go. Paul goes on to say:

In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. (1 Corinthians 7:15 ESV)

Or as the NRSV has it:

In such a case the brother or sister is not bound. (1 Corinthians 7:15 NRSV)

7. The brother or sister is not bound

In the case of a mixed marriage where the believer is willing to stay but the unbeliever is unwilling and leaves, the believer is not bound. He or she is free to remarry. That is what the text means:

Not bound here refers to freedom to remarry. Instone-Brewer explains: “The only freedom that makes any sense in this context is the freedom to remarry ... [A]ll Jewish divorce certificates and most Greco-Roman ones contained the words ‘you are free to marry any man you wish,’ or something very similar.”⁸

God doesn’t call you to fight for something that can’t be saved or to hold on to someone who doesn’t want you to hold on to them. God didn’t call you to that. He called you to peace.

God has called you to peace. (1 Corinthians 7:15 ESV)

8. God called you to peace

In 15b and then in 16 the Apostle seems to summarizing and bringing this section to a close. You can’t save what doesn’t want to be saved. You can’t pull the plug as a believer, but you don’t have to go down with the ship. Live at peace, whenever you can, but sometimes YOU CAN’T. He said much the same thing in Romans 12:18:

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12:18 ESV)

If you find yourself as a believer married to an unbeliever, try to live at peace with that person. Seek their salvation. If they close their ears and their heart to you, if they walk away, then you

⁸Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 302.

are not bound. You are free to remarry. Go in peace.

Conclusion:

This is a hard teaching, I know that, but it is filled with grace and pastoral care. As your pastor I plead with you, don't change it, don't lie to yourself or to others about what this texts says.

Don't ignore it. Don't act and counsel others as though this passage is not in your Bible. All Scripture is inspired by God and PROFITABLE. You need this teaching. There may be people in your life, struggling with these issues that need this teaching. So don't ignore it. Pray for the grace to believe it. Pray for help to obey it.

Are you a believer married to an unbeliever this morning? Pray for God's help to live this teaching out. Seek the peace of your partner. Seek their salvation. Give yourself generously to them without fear that you will lose status or dignity before God. They will be blessed; you will not be defiled. Ask them to live with you in a real marriage. Show them what a real Christian spouse is all about. Who knows whether you will save your husband? Who knows whether you will save your wife? But if they will not have you, if they walk away, then let them go. You are not bound. You are free. You can remarry, or you can stay single according to the grace that God gives to you. Go in peace. Because this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.