



Study 1 – 1 Corinthians 7:1-24
Marriage, Divorce and Changing Circumstances

Getting Started:

Last year we looked at 1 Corinthians 1-6. If you were there for that series, you'll remember that Paul had been dealing with matters that had been reported to him (eg. 1 Cor 1:11; 5:1). From chapter 7, Paul turns to a series of the Corinthians own concerns which they had written to him about (1 Cor 7:1).

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-24

1. What are the various topics Paul teaches on in this section?
 - a. Why is Paul talking about these here?
 - b. What might be going on in Corinth that is causing them to have questions about these things?
2. As Paul deals with these questions he seems to distinguish between his own words and the words of Jesus in this section (7:10, 12, 25). Why do you think he does this?
3. What do we learn about sex, singleness, marriage and divorce from this passage?
 - a. Sex & Celibacy
 - b. Singleness
 - c. Marriage
 - i. Why should a believing partner in a mixed marriage not seek to leave their unbelieving partner?
 1. What do you make of verse 14?
 - d. Divorce
4. How does this passage challenge our culture's values on sex, singleness, marriage and divorce?

5. What makes this a sensitive issue for us to talk about?
 - a. How kind of heart attitude should we have as we do this together now?
6. How should those of us who are married respond to this passage?
7. How should those of us who are not married respond to this passage?

Pray

1. Pray in response to something you are challenged about in the passage
2. Pray for others in your group, or those you know who might find this a hard passage to think through
3. Pray for your Mission Partner

such circumstances". He argues that to be "bound" in verse 15 means the same as in v.27 and v.39 (see NASB) - in other words the believing (deserted) partner is not bound to keep his or her marriage commitment because the unbelieving partner has broken the marriage and left. Hill goes on to argue: "While Paul does not explicitly state that the believer whose unbelieving partner leaves is free to remarry, it is more than reasonable to draw this conclusionit is as though the partner is dead." [In other words, Hill believes that things other than death (in this case desertion) can "break" the marriage commitment; and that the phrase "*a believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances*" implies that the believer is in this instance free to remarry.

From this point Hill expands the application of these verses - "The logic of the Kingdom of God, which is the logic of mutual love relationships, suggests that a believer who leaves his or her spouse and refuses to repent would no longer qualify as a member of the Kingdom. Jesus endorsed this logic when he declared that such people be treated as gentiles and tax collectors (Matt 18:15-20).... There is some scriptural warrant then for treating the deserting spouse as a non-believer. And if this is so, the command of Paul to the believer with an unbelieving spouse would be applicable to the believer whose Christian partner leaves and will not return. In this case the believer would not be bound by his or her marriage vows and would be free to remarry."

Hill does however note the great practical and pastoral difficulty in determining when a marriage breakdown has reached the point where one partner has no intention of reconciliation and so should be treated as a non-believer.

John Stott: John Stott is a renowned evangelical author, the Rector Emeritus of All Souls Church, Langham Place, London, and President of the London institute for Contemporary Christianity

In commenting on the contribution of 1 Cor 7 Stott says: "Paul echoes and confirms Jesus' prohibition of divorce..... Indeed, the prohibition of divorce is stated in absolute terms. This is because Paul is expressing the general principle".

On the issue of the "separation" in v.11 Stott notes: The verb Paul uses for "separate" (in v.11) could refer to divorce and was so used both in marriage contracts in the papyri and by some early Church Fathers. Stott however argues from the context that Paul is not referring to divorce here but to some other form of separation. Stott, who believes that divorce and remarriage are permissible in the case of serious sexual immorality, suggests that Paul is envisaging a situation in which the wife is not at liberty to divorce her husband (ie. he has not been sexually unfaithful) and so has simply separated from him. Stott notes Paul's emphasis that in this case she is not free to remarry. Her Christian calling is either to remain single or be reconciled to her husband, but not to remarry someone else.

Regarding "mixed marriage" Stott argues that Paul "permits divorce after a believer has been deserted by an unbelieving partner". If the unbelieving partner is unwilling to stay and decides to leave, a believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances - that is, not bound to the marriage itself. The believer's freedom in this instance is not due to 'desertion'

of any kind...but only to the specific unwillingness of an unconverted person on religious grounds to continue living with his or her now converted partner. This passage therefore, "provides no basis for divorce on the general grounds of desertion, this is not a Christian option."

Stott sums up what Scripture teaches on marriage and divorce as follows;

- 1) God created humankind male and female in the beginning and himself instituted marriage. His intention was and is that human sexuality will find fulfillment in marriage and that marriage will be an exclusive, loving, and lifelong union. This is his purpose.
- 2) Divorce is nowhere commanded, and never even encouraged in Scripture. On the contrary, even if biblically justified, it remains a sad and sinful declension from the divine norm.
- 3) Divorce and remarriage are permissible (not mandatory) on two grounds. First, an innocent person may divorce his partner if the latter has been guilty of serious sexual immorality. Secondly, a believer may acquiesce in the desertion of his or her unbelieving partner, if the latter refuses to go on living with him or her.

Stott argues that remarriage is only possible within the range of biblical permissions and recommends that at the church service for such remarriage there should be some expression of penitence (since every divorce, even when biblically permissible, is a declension from the divine norm).

More generally Stott comments: The marriage covenant is not an ordinary human contract which, if one party reneges, may be renounced by the other. It is more like God's covenant with his people.... only fundamental sexual unfaithfulness breaks the covenant. And even this does not lead automatically or necessarily to divorce; it may rather be an occasion for reconciliation and forgiveness. In all this Stott acknowledges "we continue to be caught in the tension between law and grace, witness and compassion, prophetic ministry and pastoral care". In conclusion Stott states we need both courage and compassion.

J Carl Laney: Carl Laney was (and perhaps still is) Professor of Biblical Literature at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary. He argues "no divorce, no remarriage" - in other words on the continuum above he is as far down the left end as possible.

Laney makes much of this section in 1 Corinthians. He begins by noting that "it would be most helpful to know how a first-century Greek scholar and theologian understood Jesus' teaching on this topic. Fortunately we have such a first century interpreter of the words of Jesus in the apostle Paul".

In support of his overall argument Laney draws attention to the fact that Paul, in vv. 10-11, does not include the "so called" 'exception clause' of Jesus "*except for marital unfaithfulness*" (see Matt 5:32; 19:9 cf. Mk 10:10-12).

Laney notes: "Paul declares in no uncertain terms that married persons should not seek divorce. Yet Paul concedes that in a fallen world divorce does occur. What then should be the action followed by believers who disobey Christ's command and become divorced or

separated? Paul leaves the divorced believer with only two options. The first option is to remain permanently unmarried...the second option is that of reconciliation”.

On the question of mixed marriages Laney acknowledges that “evangelicals” popularly hold that Paul allows divorce in the case of abandonment. However, Laney argues, that this interpretation “lacks strong support from the biblical text.” He goes on to say, “First it is very unlikely that Paul would permit in verse 15 something forbidden in verses 10-13. Second, while Paul recognised the possibility of unapproved divorce among Christians, under the command of Jesus remarriage to another partner was not allowed (vv.10-11). It is difficult to see why remarriage should be allowed in this case and not in the preceding one (vv.10-11) since Paul taught that marriage with a believer is no different from marriage with an unbeliever. Third, the winning of the unbelieving partner to Christ (v.14) would take place only through a continued or reconciled marriage, not through divorce and remarriage to a new partner.....Paul is simply saying in verse 15 that Christ’s prohibition against divorce does not enslave the believer to maintain the union against the wishes of an unbelieving partner”.

He goes on to say: “Many of those who take verse 15 as allowing for divorce in the case of desertion also argue that a second marriage is permitted....But note carefully that Paul says nothing in the verse about a second marriage for the deserted spouse...All that ‘*not bound*’ clearly means is that he or she need not feel so bound by Christ’s prohibition of divorce as to be afraid to depart when the heathen partner insists on separation.” Laney states that the word “bound” in verse 15 is “quite different” [in the Greek] from the word bound in v.39 (cf. Hill above). Laney concludes his comments on this section with the following statement: “If the unbeliever demands divorce, it should be granted for the sake of peace. While the continuation of marriage may provide the unbelieving partner with a gospel witness, the conversion of the unbeliever is not guaranteed by the continuation of the marriage.”

Others:

Moving further up the continuum to the right from those scholars considered above some understand a divorce as simply acknowledging legally what has already occurred. This leads them to look for other situations or behaviors which effectively dissolve a marriage. Others emphasise God’s grace and issues of forgiveness.

Additional Notes:

- Blomberg argues that: The words translated “separate” (v.10); “divorce” (v.11); and “leave” (v.15) appear to be used interchangeably (as demonstrated by the parallelism of these verses). Each is used to signify ending the marriage relationship. If there is any difference between the wife *separating* in verse 10- and the husband *divorcing* in verse 11 it may be historo-cultural – in Jewish law at this time the man was legally entitled to divorce his wife, whereas the woman often had no recourse but to move out. (In contrast to Jewish Law, Greek and Roman law permitted a wife to divorce her husband).
- On the question of the remarriage of widows see also 1 Tim 5:14.
- “*But if she does, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled....*” (v.11). This verse envisages the possibility that the woman will disobey the command not to separate, and

provides a contingency. (Alternatively one commentator suggests that the tense used in v.11 refers to an already existing situation - in other words, the wife has already separated when she became a Christian or heard this letter).

- The options to “remain unmarried” or “be reconciled” (v.11) might be understood as linked - it is because of the hope of reconciliation that remarriage is forbidden.