

INTRODUCTION

Chapter seven of 1 Corinthians is a very misunderstood chapter and sometimes a controversial chapter. And it is a chapter that is often studied frantically by people who have been divorced or are considering a divorce. I want to explain what God's word says about marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Glenn Wolf from Blythe, California, holds the Guinness record for marriage. He's been married 25 times. He's 76 years old. The shortest marriage lasted 38 days. The longest lasted five years. He says he's looking forward to number 26. He keeps two wedding dresses at all times in his own closet. He's been married on Christmas, New Year's, four times on Valentine's, Thanksgiving, and the 4th of July. When someone interviewed him, they said, "In a time when people are simply living together, why do you even go through the motions of getting married?" I love his answer. He said, "I don't want to live in sin." I hate to inform Mr. Wolf that he can be living in sin, even though he's married. First Corinthians 7:10-24 says:

To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. ¹¹ But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. ¹⁶ How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? ¹⁷ Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. ¹⁸ Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. ¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. ²⁰ Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. ²¹ Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. ²² For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is

Christ's slave. ²³ You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. ²⁴ Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.

Paul says, "For the matters you wrote about..." We don't know what the church in Corinth wrote about. We can only determine what they asked him by his answers. It's almost like listening to one side of a telephone conversation. We don't know what their questions were, but you can surmise from some of his answers what they were asking. And they were asking a lot of questions about marriage.

Now there's one thing you must keep in mind as you study this chapter. Most of these people were adults before they even heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. None of these people had the benefit of growing up in a Christian home, hearing the Christian gospel and accepting Christ as a child or a teenager. Paul found a group of utter pagans...Gentiles without Christ. He preached the gospel, they became Christians, and then they had all sorts of questions. Now that I'm a Christian, what about my marriage?

Paul explains three kinds of adults as it relates to a marriage relationship. He addresses the unmarried. It is a Greek word that only appears four times in the New Testament. All four times are right here in 1 Corinthians seven. Most Greek scholars believe that is a word for divorced people: one who has been married and has been "loosed" from their marriage. He's making a distinction from other relationships. There are those who are married and then they are divorced. Those are the unmarried. Then there are those who are married and their mate dies. That makes them widows. The third category is in verse 25 and deals with someone single who has never been married.

So you see, he has something to say to those who were married and divorced. He has something to say to those who are married and then were widowed. And then he's going to say something to those who had never been married. In this message I will address the first two categories...what he said in verse eight to the unmarried and to the widows. Paul was single, but he said if they cannot control themselves, they should marry for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. But if you take only that statement, you get a skewed, simplified picture of a much larger issue. And you need to take all the scripture in context to understand the issue of divorce and remarriage.

I. SHOULD TWO BELIEVERS EVER DIVORCE?

That's one of the questions they wrote him about in the church at Corinth. In verses 10 and 11, he answers that question specifically. He says, "To the married, I give this command..." That means it's imperative. "Not I but the Lord, a wife must not separate from her husband." He says that's ideal. Don't separate. But notice he goes on to say, but if it happens anyway, she must remain unmarried or else be

reconciled to her husband. A husband must not divorce his wife. Now let's look at what he's saying here.

Three statements:

1. God's ideal will is for you to stay together

He says, do not be “loosed” from your husband or wife. Stay together. It is God's ideal plan for marriages to stay together. Now I don't have to convince you of that. The Bible makes that very, very clear. When Jesus is talking about marriage, he quotes from the book of Genesis. He says, “For this reason, shall a man leave his father and mother and shall be joined unto his wife.” I've always liked that the King James uses a word that says he shall “cleave” unto his wife. That word cleave we don't use very much, but it was one of those strange English words that can mean two totally opposite things. Because when you take a meat cleaver, what do you do? You separate meat. And so the word can mean to separate, but the word can also mean to join together.

And of course that's what Jesus meant. And then Jesus makes this overarching statement about marriage. He says what God has joined together, let no man tear apart. Now that's God's bottom line about marriage. According to what Jesus said, it is not a marriage license that makes you married. I'm talking to Christians. It's not a marriage ceremony. It's not rings on your finger. It's not vows that you recite. You know who it is that marries you and binds you together. Jesus said what God has joined together. And so it is God who unites a husband and a wife and makes them one. And so Paul says, should you separate? He says, absolutely not; stay together. He says that's what God's ideal is.

Paul recognizes just as we do that sometimes people do not live up to God's standard. That's tragic, but it's true. Sometimes Christians don't. And so Paul addresses what happens if you do separate.

2. If you are separated, seek reconciliation

This is not talking about divorce. Paul says to remain unmarried or else be reconciled. There are some times when I counsel a Christian wife to separate herself from her husband. I do this anytime that there is continual and chronic abuse in a relationship. The safest thing that we can counsel to a wife in that situation is to get out of that environment.

I didn't say divorce. your husband. I said get a separation; get away from that situation. But that doesn't mean you're free to remarry and live your life. You ought to always seek reconciliation. For the last 20 years, I have seen some marriages that I thought were so far gone that they could never ever be healed in my own mind. I thought this will never be work out. But guess what? I was wrong. I have seen God rebuild some of the marriages that I thought were so far gone they could never get back together. God did it. You know why? Because in that situation, both

partners were willing to work for reconciliation. On the other hand, I've seen situations that weren't all that awful and terrible end in divorce. I thought the problems were not insurmountable, but it ended in divorce. In fact, let me share just one example from years ago in my ministry. And I would laugh at this if it wasn't so tragic. But there was a husband and a wife who ended up getting a divorce because the argument was whether you're supposed to rinse off the dishes before you put them in a dishwasher. That led to such anger and hatred and bitterness and animosity. They're divorced today. But you know the difference. You must have both partners who are willing to do what God wants done, and that is reconciliation.

3. Sexual immorality permits divorce, not demands it

Sometimes you don't stay together. And sometimes when you separate and you seek reconciliation, it's impossible because that other person refuses to be reconciled. Matthew 19 explains what Jesus had to say about this. It is very misunderstood. Let's say a Christian couple separates and one partner doesn't want to be reconciled. And so they get a divorce. Is that Christian allowed to remarry? We'll look at what Jesus said. In verse eight, Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hardened."

There are lots of divorces, but it's never God's standard. The only reason Moses ever said he allowed it is because he said your hearts are hard and you're sinful human beings. That's what Jesus said. "But it was not that way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness and marries another woman commits adultery."

Since this was so hard to take, the disciples said it's just better not to marry. That's what the church at Corinth was saying—maybe it's just better not to marry. But Jesus explained that there are some people that are unmarried for different reasons. And he says, this message has given to those who need to hear it. And you know whether you're in that category or not.

The exception Jesus makes talks about sexual unfaithfulness, marital unfaithfulness. It is the Greek word "porneia" that means an umbrella word that covers all kinds of sex. Sometimes people try to get picky on this and they say the exception must be adultery or a divorce is not permitted. No, that word "porneia" covers a whole spectrum of sexual sins. It can be homosexuality. It can be a lot of different sexual sins. And so it's not confined just to the one sexual sin of adultery, although adultery is included under the umbrella. Now this is what God's saying. If in a marriage relationship there has been sexual immorality on the part of one partner or another, then divorce is permitted. But I want to say again, it is not demanded. I know marriages where there were sexual immorality and adultery, and the other spouse said I must divorce my spouse.

No, you don't have to. In fact, God's standard is still reconciliation and forgiveness. And I know some marriages that are thriving, even though at one time in the past there was sexual immorality. It doesn't mean you must get divorced, but Jesus said that becomes an option. But even that is not God's perfect standard. The only reason God made this allowance is because of our sinful hearts. If you are a Christian married to a Christian, then God's standard is for you to stay together, stick together, work through your problems. If there's a problem, seek reconciliation and do everything you can to repair the marriage.

II. SHOULD A CHRISTIAN DIVORCE AN UNBELIEVING MATE?

In the church at Corinth, many of the adults heard the gospel and one spouse accepted Christ and the other did not. Let's say today a wife becomes a Christian and her husband says, "No, I don't want to have anything to do with that stuff." What are you to do? Now? The reason they were asking this question is because some of them said not to be yoked together with an unbeliever. They said hey, the unbeliever that you're married to is pulling you down. They're polluting your life. And so the best thing you can do, they said, is get away from that spouse who is not a Christian. And you know, there are some today that feel that same way too. A spouse says, "I'm a believer. My mate's not a believer. And I think the best thing I could do for me and the children is just to leave him, leave her."

Well, here's the answer from God's word in 1 Corinthians seven beginning in verse 12. Paul says, "I say this...not the Lord." So some wonder if that's not really the word of God. Verse 10 says it's from the Lord. Which is it? Jesus had a statement about the first category. We just read it in Matthew 19. And what Paul is saying here is we don't have any scripture that speaks to what I'm about to speak about. So I cannot quote Jesus on this. They didn't have the four gospel accounts when Paul wrote this, but they did have some of the sayings of Jesus circulating. And Paul knew the one that we just read in Matthew 19. So he said, this is what the Lord says, but because nowhere did Jesus speak and address this next topic, this is not the words of the Lord. This is *my* word. But that makes it no less authoritative. Understand that Paul is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and these words in verse 12 are just as inspired of God as the ones in Matthew 19. So Paul is not apologizing. He's just letting them know that Jesus didn't say this, but he's saying here it is.

"If any brother [that means a Christian] 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. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean. [And that word "unclean" is a word for "pagan"] but as it is, they are holy."

1. Conversion frees us from sin, but not from our relationships

Let's say the husband becomes a Christian. He says, "I'm free." Paul says you're free from your sin, but you're not free from your mate. Here's a woman who says, "I'm a Christian now. I'm free." Paul says you're free from your sin, but you're not free from your husband. Now he illustrates that in verse 17 through 24. He's going to give two examples. Here was a man already circumcised when he was called, that means saved. He should not become uncircumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's command is what counts. That's his first example, circumcision. He's using this to illustrate marriage. The second example in verse 20 is about a slave and remaining in the situation you were in when you were saved. As a believer, if you have an unbelieving mate, when you became a Christian you remain in that relationship/situation. He says, do not divorce her, do not divorce him. You can't walk out on a relationship and blame it on your Christianity.

2. Don't initiate a divorce

You, as a believer, are not to initiate a divorce. You are to seek to influence the family. He uses the word "sanctify" in verse 14. "Who knows?" Paul says. You may sanctify your wife. That doesn't mean they can be saved. But what it means is that you can have a positive influence on your family, on your children, on your spouse. Now I know that in most situations it is a woman who's married to a man who is not a Christian. And there are a lot of women who struggle with that. And a lot of times we sort of lovingly call them church widows because they come to church Sunday after Sunday, but their husband has little or no interest. And the man might even claim to be a Christian. But you know deep down inside that they're probably not a Christian. What are you supposed to do?

The Bible has a specific word to you. First Peter three, verse one says: "...wives in the same way, be submissive to your husbands." Remember, Peter was married because he had a mother-in-law. He says do this "so that if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over..." Without talk, but by the behavior. That's the key: by the behavior of their wives. When men see the purity and reverence of your lives, this is the key. If you're married to a man who's not a Christian, the Bible says that your desire and goal in life ought to be to win them to Christ. But ladies, as kindly as I can put it, you do not do it by nagging them. You do not do it by preaching to them. In fact, the Bible says the best way to do it is non-verbally.

I'll never forget a man that I knew as a friend who was not a Christian, and his wife was one of those dynamic Christians who was at the church every time the doors were open. She was always coming to me and saying, "Oh, pray that my husband will get saved." And she was always preaching to her husband, and he never came to church. I was at this church for about five years and never once did he darken the door of the church? I can just remember one time I had lunch with him at a

restaurant. And I just said, "You're a great guy. And you know, your wife is at church all the time. And I'm just curious, why don't you ever come to church?" His answer just floored me. He said, "You know my wife. The only hours of peace and quiet that I have during the week are the hours that she's at church."

And he was just as honest as he could be. And I know that his wife's desire was genuine and pure, but she was going about it the wrong way. She was preaching to him, and she should have just been living the Christian life. Is that possible? Is it possible to love your husband to Jesus? Even though it seems hopeless? A lady wrote a letter to Dr. James Dobson, and this was printed for Focus on the Family. Maybe it's be an encouragement to some of you ladies who are having a tough time. Dear Dr. Dobson, I was married to a non-believer for 14 years and what proved to be a living hell on earth. There's no way I could describe how terribly Brent treated me during that time. I considered running away or anything that would help me cope. It seemed my prayers and church work were useless in bringing peace of mind. Gradually I gave into the advances of another church member. He also was unhappily married, and inevitably we became deeply involved in an affair. This man's wife then died of heart disease. And I intended to divorce my husband and marry him. But when Brent saw that he was losing me with no hope of reconciliation, he quietly gave up all the terrible treatment of me and became kind almost overnight. He even changed occupations to give him more time at home. That put me in a very difficult situation. I loved the other man and felt I could not live without him. And yet it was wrong to divorce my husband.

By a lot sheer faith I broke off the relationship with the other man. And I did what I believe to be right in the sight of God. For three years I did not feel anything for my husband. I claimed the scriptures and believed that if I would do what they said, the Lord would give me what I had never had. I admit that I went through a terrible struggle with my emotions at this time. During the last two years, however, God has poured out a blessing on us that you cannot believe. I am so committed to my husband that I find myself loving the man I hated for 14 years, God has given me an intense affection for him. Now, something else has happened. Our children have grown so close to us and love each other as never before. We love to look in the scriptures for things to obey. And then we make a commitment to do what we've read. First it included a daily study of the word. Now it involves church work together. We are a witness to all those who see this incredible change in our family. I've said all this to say this, it is worth everything to follow God's will even when it contradicts our desires. There's always the temptation to chunk it from time to time. But I'd rather spend five minutes in real fellowship with the Lord than a lifetime in anything else. I can truly say God's word works.

Wow. What a testimony of a woman married to a non-Christian who followed the commandment of God.

III. WHAT IF A CHRISTIAN CHOOSES TO DIVORCE THEIR CHRISTIAN MATE?

In both of these cases, the apostle Paul says, this is God's standard: Christians do not divorce your mate. But if you're separated, don't remarry; seek reconciliation. In other words, God's standard is set, but sometimes the other person does not allow us to obey God's standard. So what if your non-Christian spouse divorces their Christian mate? Verse 15 says 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. How do you know whether you'll save your husband? How do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife. Now, those questions are apparently in the negative. Maybe you're thinking that you can, but if they leave that removes you from that responsibility. So here's the two statements that we need to consider.

1. If you're married to a non-Christian spouse and they initiate the divorce, let him or her go peacefully

Now that's the key: go peacefully. One of the saddest things that we've seen in a lot of marriages, even in the church, is when they fall apart an ugly fight hurts the children. That hurts parents, that hurts friends. Paul is saying that if an unbelieving mate chooses to leave, you let them go, but live in peace. If you're the Christian, you can't initiate the divorce, but if they choose to leave, you let them go peacefully.

2. Remarriage is permitted

Look at the unmarried and those who are widows in this passage. Remarriage is permitted, but here's the key, only to a Christian. Now the Bible makes it very clear not to be unequally yoked together. Now, you know what that means? That means a Christian is not to be married to a non-Christian. Remember, the problem at Corinth was that none of them were Christians. And then they heard the gospel and one became a believer. And when one wasn't a believer, that's being unequally yoked together. What that means is that when you're choosing a mate and you are a Christian, you are never to choose an unbeliever.

Somebody asked me the other day if I believe in mixed marriages. I said absolutely not. I do not believe that a non-Christian should marry a Christian. And in my mind, that is the mixed marriage that the Bible forbids. Don't yoke together an unbeliever with a believer. Verse 39 makes it very clear. As he's addressing the word to widows, the principle holds true for all Christians. If a husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. Now there's the principle that if you are the victim of divorce, if you are the one who did everything you could to seek reconciliation and rebuild a marriage...and yet your spouse divorced you and they're the ones who rejected you...you can remarry, but

only to a believer. Now there's a lot of confusion about the whole issue of divorce and remarried. So I want to conclude with just four principles.

1. God hates divorce

Malachi 2:19 says those words. God says, "I hate divorce." You must understand God hates divorce, but it doesn't say God hates divorced people. Did you catch that? God loves divorced people. God loves widows. God loves married people. God loves people who've never been married. He doesn't say I hate people who divorce. He says, I hate divorce. God hates it because of all the pain it causes, all the heartache that it causes, all the relationships that get disrupted and ruptured through divorce. It's ugly. It's painful. It's a heartache. And that's why God hates it because God hates anything that causes pain.

2. Reconciliation is God's plan after separation

That is always, always, always the case. Reconciliation is always God's plan after separation. Now a friend, this is between you and God, but if you have been divorced, or you are going through a divorce or it's something that seems to be happening, I want to tell you upon the authority of God's word that he wants you to do everything you can to rebuild a marriage, to seek reconciliation.

Sometimes that is impossible. Honestly, I have seen a husband who wanted to rebuild a marriage and restore that marriage, but sometimes it became impossible when that wife goes off and remarries or just refuses to be reconciled. But if you before God can say you honestly did everything you could for reconciliation, God doesn't hold you accountable at that point. And only God knows whether or not you tried.

3. Remarriage without repentance and attempted reconciliation

I'm talking about divorce here. We're not talking about widows. Here's a person who gets a divorce. Let's say that person remarries without repentance of their sin. What is repentance? I'll tell you what repentance is. Repentance is admitting sin in your life and being willing to turn from it.

Now, if you have been divorced, whether or not you felt like you were 1% responsible, 51% responsible or 99% responsible, if you have been divorced, the very first thing you need to do is say, "God, I recognize that divorce is sin. There is no way around it. Divorce is sin. It represents failure. It represents lying because I told this person till death do us part. I told this person for better or for worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. God, it didn't work out. And so I take responsibility for my part in the failure of this marriage." There must be a recognition of it as sin and repentance. You say, "God, I turned from it and I know that that was wrong. And from this point on in my life, I want to live my life according to your word."

I want to say again, divorce is sin and remarriage can be sin in some situations, but also I want to say very quickly, friend, the only reason I'm hitting divorce so hard in this passage of scripture is because that's what the scripture is addressing. But I want to say in all love to those of you who've gone through a painful divorce that sin is sin in God's eyes. And the sin of divorce is no worse than the sin of lying. The sin of divorce is no worse than the sin of adultery. The sin of divorce is no worse than the sin of stealing. It's just sometimes the consequences and the visible results of divorce are so much more painful and so much more obvious.

4. Grace is greater than our sins

If you have been through divorce, we do not want you to wear a Scarlet D on your forehead for the rest of your life. And I'm not saying that you can never be happy again in your life. I'm not saying that you can never be in God's will again in your life. Listen, you deal with the mistakes of your past. You deal with them and you recognize which of those mistakes were sin. And you confess and repent of it. But then you start where you are right now. And you ask God to take you from there. I understand there are some marriages that have fallen apart. They can't be rebuilt. You can't unscramble eggs. You can't get toothpaste back in the tube.

Sometimes it's impossible to rebuild them, but if you've done everything you can, I think God says, "This is where you are now. I want to bless you."

CONCLUSION

Those of you that are married or single or divorced or whatever...I want you to think about your past for a moment. I want you to think about your present for a moment. Are you married at this moment? Will you make a commitment right now for the rest of your life that you're going to follow God's will for your marriage? Will you do that? If you're not married, would you make a commitment that for the rest of your life, you're going to seek God's will concerning marriage or remarriage for you? Would you seek his perfect will? If you do that, God will bless your marriage. God will bless your life.

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