

February 7th, 2021

The Story God Tells in Marriage

1 Corinthians 7:8-16

The Master of Marriage¹

One of the profound things about this passage this morning, is that it uncovers our basic presuppositions about marriage and singleness. What is the world's basic presupposition regarding marriage? They believe that marriage is whatever you want it to be. Back in 2012, when President Obama came out in favor of so-called same sex marriage, I was dialoguing with a Christian who was frustrated with Christians who opposed the President's policy. It wasn't that he was in favor of so-called same sex marriage, he just believed that the government should stay out of the business of marriage. He said 'the government shouldn't have the right to define marriage.' But I pointed out, this is *precisely* what they were doing. By telling the nation that anybody could get married to whoever they want, they were usurping their authority. Marriage is an institution given to us by God that *pre-existed* human government. Jesus said in **Matthew 19:4-6** "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' So they are no

¹ Has the world infected your thinking?

The book of 1 Corinthians is one of those books that exposes how much we think like the world. Here we are chapter seven where Paul is speaking about singleness and marriage. Test yourself, if you are single, are you tempted to mentally check out when Paul speaks about marriage, because, well that doesn't apply to you? Or if you are married, are eager for Paul to stop talking about singleness so you can get help for your marriage? Beloved that is how the world thinks. What do "I" get out of this? The Bible is not about you. The Bible's main concern is about the Triune God and the people He's redeeming. You are in third place. Don't you realize that you now belong to a body of brothers and sisters who are going through either hardships of the single life or married life, and you need to know these things so that you can counsel them, disciple them and care for them? This idea of coming to the Bible merely to meet my felt needs is worldly. The Bible is showing you that you are in a completely different realm. 1 Corinthians 12:13 "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit." So if this doesn't apply directly to you this morning, be praying 'Lord, help be receive and understand Your Word so I can help those members of my body that need it.'

longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”?” This is Paul’s presupposition as he is laying out the rules for marriage: God alone is the one who regulates marriage, because He invented it. As the late R.C. Sproul has said:

“[God] did not simply create the estate of marriage, give it to the human race, and allow us to do with it whatever we want. Rather, God circumscribed the institution of matrimony by His law, and He set forth certain principles to govern it. He determined who may enter into marriage, when one may enter into it, and what constitutes a valid marriage and a valid dissolution of it.”²

The Lord is the master of marriage and He has the right as Sovereign over all, to tell us what He demands from us regarding it. Don’t let the world tell you what marriage is.

The Big Idea...

As we obey the Lord's law for marriage, we will discover the story of the unbreakable covenant He planned for us

- ☆ The Story of Singleness (v.8-9)
- ☆ The Story of Christian Marriages (v.10-11)
- ☆ The Story of Mixed Marriages (v.12-16)

² R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Systematic Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Orlando, FL.: Reformation Trust, 2019), pg. 526. And this is what the Westminster Confession of Faith says on it’s chapter on Marriage and Divorce, **24.6**: “...the persons concerned in *it* [are] not left to their own wills, [or] discretion...”

I. The Story of Singleness

It is *good* to stay single

Remember that Paul now is responding to a letter that the Corinthians wrote to him. We see that in **v.1** “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote...” So first of all, concerning their questions about single people, Paul answers them **v.8** “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am.” So Paul is addressing those who have never been married and those who have lost their spoused dude to death. He will address singles who have been divorced below. Notice he says “To the unmarried and the widows *I say...*” He’s not giving a command here for all singles to remain single. He’s going to change his language in **v.10** to command language. But here, Paul says “*I say,*” in other words, similar to **v.6** Paul is explaining the benefits of a single life. It is “*good*” he says “to remain single, as I am.” It’s good, it’s beneficial, it’s profitable. Paul the single life is great blessing that brings happiness and joy. Why? He gives three reasons at the end of this chapter. It is great gain for singles to remain unmarried **1)** Because of the present crisis (**v.25-28**); **2)** Because the end of the world is near (**v.29-31**); and **3)** Because you will be free from the anxieties of the married life in order to devote yourself entirely to Christ.

Anna the single woman who served and spoke

Please turn with me to **Luke 2:36-38**. Remember this was when Joseph and Mary brought the baby Jesus to Jerusalem to the temple to present Him to the Lord. Who did they meet there? A single woman named Anna. Picking up in **v.36** we read “And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, *worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day*. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Do you see the unspeakable gift that Anna had? 1) Because she was free from the anxieties of pleasing her husband, v.37 says she was able to worship Her Savior in the temple night and day. Constant, uninterrupted devotion. 2) She was most free to build up the Church. v.38 says that she was able "...to speak of Him *to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.*" Do you see? Because Anna never remarried, she was most free to be an instrument in the Redeemer's hands. When we meet her in Heaven, what do you think she will say about her single life? Do you think she regretted it. No. She received reward in this life, and in the life to come. That's why Paul says "It is *good* to remain single."

Do I have the gift of singleness?

Please turn back to 1 Corinthians 7. Paul doesn't leave it there. Picking up in v.9 "But if they cannot exercise *self-control*, they should marry." Stop. Paul illustrates what he means by *self-control* later in 9:25 when he says "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things." In order for athletes to win at the games, they had to abstain from unwholesome foods, from alcohol, and from sexual indulgence, otherwise they could not win. Paul is saying that if single people cannot control themselves sexually, they should marry. Now Paul changes his language to a command, this is an imperative—they should marry. Why? End of v.9 "For it is better to marry than to burn with passion." Calvin provides helpful insight here, he says: "We must...define what is meant by *burning*, for many [persons] are stung with fleshly desires, who...do not require...to have recourse to marriage...it is one thing *to burn* and another to feel heat. Hence what Paul here calls *burning*, is not a mere slight feeling, but a boiling with lust, so that you cannot resist."³ Now that is how you can know if you have this gift of singleness that Paul mentions in v.7. If by God's grace you can control yourself, then you may have the good gift of singleness. But if you cannot, then "marriage is [always] better than struggling with the lusts of the flesh."⁴

³ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. XX*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerBooks 2009), pg. 236

⁴ Kim Riddlebarger, *The Lectio Continua: Expository Commentary on the New Testament: First Corinthians*, (Powder Springs, GA.,: Tolle Lege Press, 2013), pg. 172

Principle: “Whatever helps you live for Christ *best*”

Here’s Paul’s main principle for you single brothers and sisters: Whatever helps you to live for Christ best, go do that. Paul’s entire aim is to free you so that you can best serve and love the Lord Jesus Christ and His Church. Do you see how the Lord is completely redefining your life? You should never want to be single *merely* because being married is so hard. Likewise, you should never want to be married *simply* because other people are pressuring you, or because that’s what Americans do.

The story God is telling in your singleness

Beloved God is telling a story through your singleness, it’s the greatest story. It’s the **6:20** story. Look back at **6:20**. “For you were bought with a price. So glorify God in *your body*.” Your body was meant for *one thing*. Your body was not meant for your personal private freedom, or your gratification. Your body is meant for Him, who loved You and gave Himself of you. Ask yourself: can others read discern *that story* in your life? Would they be able to discern that you are remaining single simply because You love the King? Of if marriage is what the Lord is calling you to, would they be able to discern that you are getting married because you don’t want to sin against Him sexually? That’s our **first point**: the Lord wants your singleness or your marrying to speak of Him before every other consideration.

II. The Story of Christian Marriages

Not I, but the Lord

Please look at **v.10**, Paul says “To the married...” He’s now addressing Christian husbands and wives. What’s vital to remember is that Paul is *not* giving a comprehensive doctrine on marriage and divorce. There are certain things he is *not* mentioning *here* because they are mentioned in other parts of

Scripture. Notice when Paul gives this command, he says: “I give this charge (not I, but the Lord)...” That is, Paul is appealing directly to the teachings of Jesus Himself.⁵ Paul is not doing this because he himself lacks authority, we’ll see him asserting his authority in a moment. But rather he is adding “...as much force as possible to his [command]...this is not just good advice. Married believes should not divorce.”⁶ So let’s look at one place where Jesus as Lord speaks about marriage and divorce. Please turn with me to **Matthew 19:3-9**.⁷ “And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife *for any cause*?” He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.⁸ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another, commits adultery.”

The exception clause

The main difference between what Jesus says here and what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 is that Jesus gives one exception for divorce: *sexually immorality*.⁹

⁵ “This is one of the rare instances in Paul’s writings where he appeals directly to Jesus.” PCA Position Paper on Divorce and Remarriage, 1992, pg. 225. Source: <https://pcahistory.org/pca/digest/studies/divorce-remarriage.pdf> Accessed February 6th, 2021

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Also see Matthew 5:32; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18

⁸ Jesus is not contradicting Moses here, but is correctly interpreting his words in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Roy E. Ciampa & Brian S. Rosner, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The First Letter to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), pg. 291

⁹ For a vital discussion on why not every text mentions the exception, see Jim Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage: Critical Questions and Answers*, (Phillipsburg, NJ.: P & R Publishing, 2017), pg. 214-215

Paul assumes that his readers would know this. Now Paul is going to include abandonment as an exception in **1 Corinthians 7:15**, so please be patient for his argument to develop. But here Jesus' point is: *divorce is allowable only if one of the spouses commits sexual immorality.*¹⁰

The three views of marriage and divorce

Now to put this in its proper framework we have to understand that there are basically three views when it comes to marriage and divorce. **1) The Cultural View; 2) The Continuance View; and 3) The Covenantal View.** Let's take those one at a time.

1. The Cultural View of Marriage and Divorce

The cultural view says that anyone can marry anyone they choose, *and* get divorced for any reason *or* no reason at all. Our culture calls this "no fault divorce." Neither party is required to show a wrongdoing by the other in order to dissolve the marriage.¹¹ Now no Christian who believes the Scripture is the inspired Word of God can hold this view. Jesus without equivocation speaks against it. As we just read Jesus say "...whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another, commits adultery" (**Matthew 19:9**).

2. The Continuance View of Marriage and Divorce

The continuance view holds that marriage is *so permanent* that remarriage is never allowed *except* for when one spouse dies. This view has two main camps:

¹⁰ Jim Newheiser helpfully clarifies: "Jesus does not teach that the act of sexual infidelity *in itself* ends the marriage covenant, but he does teach that it is a serious enough violation of the covenant that the innocent party has a right to divorce if he or she chooses." *Ibid*, pg. 216. Sproul says here: "If a man commits adultery and then pleads for forgiveness from his wife, it is her Christian duty to forgive him. She has no other option. But that doesn't mean she must stay married to him. She must forgive him as a brother in Christ, but she does not have to receive him as a husband in Christ. His behavior radically undermined the trust that is foundational to an intimate marital relationship. If she cannot continue in such a damaged relationship, God gives her the freedom to dissolve it. The innocent part has that right, and it is wrong to condemn that Christian for exercising his or her right." Sproul, pg. 536

¹¹ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No-fault_divorce Accessed February 6, 2021

The **first camp** says that: *divorce is never allowed, and neither is remarriage*. Pastor John Piper holds this view.¹² He understand Matthew 19 entirely different. He believes that Jesus is saying divorce is completely forbidden, however if you find out that your finance has committed sexual immorality *before you get married* (like what Joseph suspected of Mary) then you can end that engagement. But outside of that, no divorce is ever allowed, under any circumstances. He justifies it by saying that because the Church is guilty of spiritual adultery agains Christ, and that Christ never divorces us, therefore we should never divorce our spouses even in the case of adultery.

The **second camp** says that: *divorce is sometimes allowed* (in the extreme cases of adultery or abandonment) *but remarriage is never allowed*.¹³ They interpret Paul's words in 1 **Corinthians 7:10** (the very verse we are considering) to forbid remarriage *even for the innocent part in the case of adultery*.

3. The Covenantal View of Marriage and Divorce

The covenantal view states that divorce is only allowed in the case of adultery and abandonment, and under those circumstances the innocent party is free to remarry. Adultery and abandonment are covenant breaking sins, and if the covenant is broken, a new covenant is permitted to be made. The WCF lays out this view in 24.5 "In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce: and, after the divorce, *to marry another, as if the offending party were dead*." They continue in the next paragraph: "...nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage." The question here is *why* do we hold to this covenantal view *instead of* the continuance view? Three main reasons.

¹² Source: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/does-the-bible-allow-for-divorce-in-the-case-of-adultery> Accessed February 6, 2021

¹³ The PRCA denomination holds this view departing from the Westminster Standards. Source: http://www.prca.org/current/Articles/WCF_Divorce_and_Remarriage_English.htm Accessed February 6, 2021

1. Wherever divorce is permitted, remarriage is permitted

Jesus said in **Matthew 19:9** “...whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality* [any kind of unlawful sexual intercourse¹⁴] and marries another, commits adultery.” In other words, if a man divorces his wife and remarries, he commits adultery *if his first wife didn’t commit sexual immorality*. But that means he is not guilty of adultery *if his first wife did commit sexual immorality*. In other words, he doesn't sin in remarriage *if his wife cheated on him*. Jesus doesn’t call that man an adulterer. The principle is stated rather succinctly by John MacArthur: “...when divorce is permitted, remarriage is permitted; where divorce is forbidden, remarriage is forbidden.”¹⁵

2. The Lord himself divorced Israel for adultery

In **Jeremiah 3:8** we read “She [Judah] saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with *a decree of divorce*.” Why did the Lord divorce Israel? Because of her spiritual adultery. Now it’s true that in one sense, all of us are guilty of spiritual adultery. However we must make a distinction between visible Israel (those who only follow Him *outwardly*) and invisible Israel (those sinners whom He has *redeemed*). Please turn to **Romans 11:2-5** “God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” But what is God's reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.” Who did God divorce? Not the 7,000 Israelites chosen by grace—He never rejects His true people. But the rest—those who killed his prophets and demolished his altars—He “divorced.”¹⁶

¹⁴ PCA Position Paper, pg. 219ff. Also see “What Sexual Sins Constitute Grounds for Divorce?” in Newheiser, pg.239ff

¹⁵ John MacArthur in Newheiser, pg. 222

¹⁶ See Newheiser, pg. 210ff

3. Only *unlawfully divorced* spouses are forbidden to remarry

Please turn back to **1 Corinthians 7**. Remember our context here. Paul's main objective is to answer the Corinthian problem. Remember back in **v.1** that some of the Corinthians believed that sexual relations *even with one's own spouse* were evil. Therefore some of them concluded that it would be better to divorce and remain celibate *so that* they could avoid the passions of the flesh. Paul *absolutely* disagrees. **v.10** "To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not *separate* from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not *divorce* his wife." You may wonder why Paul uses a different word for the wife and the husband. He says to the wife "the wife should not *separate*"¹⁷ and to the husband "the husband should not *divorce*." They are different Greek words but they come to mean the same thing. In ancient Rome, "...when the wife 'divorced' she simply left her husband...on the other hand, a man ordinary 'divorced' his wife (that is 'sent her away')" as other translations put it.¹⁸ Why then did Paul use different words? To close off every loophole. Corinth had the same "divorce-happy-culture" that we have in America today.¹⁹ Paul wants to unequivocally clear to question the Corinthians were asking: 'No, you are not allowed to divorce each other. Stay in your marriages. You are not defiling yourselves by sexually giving yourself to your spouse.'

What if they do get a divorce?

Notice that Paul does bring up the scenario of an *unlawful* divorce. **v.11** "... but if she does [*this would apply to him as well*], she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband." Clearly Christ's law forbids divorce, but "if

¹⁷ Mark 10:9 uses "separate" in the sense divorce. "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

¹⁸ PCA Position Paper, pg. 224. "We tend to interpret verses 10-11 in terms of modern day separation rather than divorce. But the Bible does not deal with the idea of separation as a "half-way house" step as we know it. Perhaps the Biblical writers were so committed to the permanence of marriage that they did not want to study ways to effect temporary separation. But more likely, it was the fact that separation in first century society was *de facto* divorce."

¹⁹ Ciampa & Rosner, pg. 292

in violation of that law, or if from necessity she [must depart]”²⁰ there are only two options: “...remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband.” In other words, improperly divorced people are not free to remarry. “In God’s eyes, [their] union has never been broken.”²¹ **Mark 10:9** “*What...God has joined together, let not man separate.*”

Addressing objections

No doubt someone can hear this and have several responses. Perhaps someone is thinking: “But I no longer love my spouse. Therefore it is best that I get a divorce.” *I no longer love my spouse.* This objection rests on the world’s notion of love. The world reduces the notion of love purely to romantic love. But loved one, that is not how the Lord primarily defines it. He commands us to love. “You *shall love* your neighbor (your spouse) as yourself.”²² In fact, you and I are commanded to “love [our] enemies” (**Mark 5:44**). Don’t you realize that “as you begin to love your spouse out of love for and obedience to Christ, God can help you to love your spouse from the heart—even romantically?”²³ You made a covenant to God. You are commanded to love them.

Someone else may say: “But God wants me to be happy, and I am miserable in my marriage, so divorce is what He would want.” The Lord does want us to be happy, and that can only come when we are holy and obedient to Him. Do you think that you can be happy if you defy God’s commands? Do you think that He will bless your disobedience?

Finally someone may say “But I married the wrong person.” Beloved, all of us have married the wrong person. “Stanley Hauerwas has famously made this point:

²⁰ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2018), pg. 113

²¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, (Chicago, IL.,: Moody Publishers, 1984), pg. 165

²² Mark 12:31

²³ Newheiser, pg. 168

“Destructive to marriage is the self-fulfillment ethic that assumes marriage and the family are primarily institutions of personal fulfillment, necessary for us to become “whole” and happy. The assumption is that there is someone just right for us to marry and that if we look closely enough we will find the right person. This moral assumption overlooks a crucial aspect to marriage. It fails to appreciate the fact that we always marry the wrong person.”²⁴

Loved ones, you married a sinner, one whose heart is just like yours—deceitful above all things and desperately sick—of course you married the wrong person. And the Lord is calling you to learn how to love and care for that person with whom you have made a covenant.

Questions answered

So then let’s address a couple of painful questions. **First**, what if you have divorced unlawfully? Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. Have you repented? Have you asked the Lord for forgiveness? If so, then know truly that the Lord has forgiven you and the blood of Jesus His Son has cleansed you from all sin. You are not a second-class Christian. Anymore than the former homosexual, or drunkard, or fornicator. You have been washed, sanctified and justified. What should you do now as a single divorced person? Heed Paul’s words. Remain unmarried or else be reconciled to your spouse. Please come talk to one of the pastors if you are struggling to know how to do that.

Second, what if you have divorced unlawfully and then remarried? Have you repented and asked the Lord for forgiveness? If so, you are forgiven. “But don’t compound that sin with more sin. Now that you’re married, it is God’s will that you do everything within your power to make your marriage work.”²⁵ Don’t you know that God can redeem and even bless this marriage? That’s what

²⁴ Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*, (New York, NY.: Penguin Group, 2011), pg. 37-38

²⁵ Newheiser, pg. 168. Newheiser also has a whole chapter on this: “What Should Be Done If Someone Has Divorced and/or Remarried Improperly?” pg. 284ff

God did with David and Bathsheba. Their marriage began with adultery and murder, and God brought forth the Messiah from them.

The story God is telling in your marriage

Dear congregation, for those in Christian marriages: God is telling a story about His covenant faithfulness to us *in Christ—the greatest story*. He has said “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”²⁶ Christian marriage tells that story, that He is committed to His bride, to His elect, *no matter what*. The more our marriages reflect that covenant commitment, the more His love for us is seen and displayed to the Church, to our children and to the world.²⁷ That’s our **second point**.

III. The Story of Mixed Marriages

What happens if my spouse doesn’t believe?

Now Paul addresses mixed marriages, that is marriages where one spouse is a believer and one is not. When Paul preached the gospel in Corinth, many became being converted. But some spouses did not believe. It seems that the Corinthians asked Paul in their letter what were they to do. So Paul address them in **v.12-13** “To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.”

²⁶ Hebrews 13:5

²⁷ “Christ himself is being formed in the Christian husband or wife. Thus far his features may be very blurred and indistinct. They are obscured by the evil features of the man or woman for whom he died and rose but in whom the old sinner still lives on so obviously and persistently. Nevertheless, those evil features belong to the dead past. The husband and wife, being Christians, died and rose again in Christ. By the Holy Spirit the new and Christlike features may and can and should emerge with increasing power and distinctness. They belong already to the present. They carry the promise of the future. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *God and Marriage*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), pg. 82

“I, not the Lord”

Again notice the parentheses, in v.10 he said “not I but the Lord” said this, but here he says “I, not the Lord” is saying this. What does he mean? He doesn’t mean this is *merely* his opinion. v.12 and v.13 are commands with full apostolic authority. What he means is that Jesus—in His earthly ministry—didn’t directly address the issue of mixed marriages. So now he must take it up. What happens when one spouse converts and the other doesn’t? Should the Christian remain married to the unbeliever?

“But won’t I become defiled?”

You have to understand why the Christians spouses in Corinth would have been concerned about this issue. They knew that they were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (6:11), but their unbelieving spouses were not. ‘Paul won’t we become unclean by maintaining sexual relations with our unbelieving spouses? Doesn’t a little leaven leaven the whole lump (5:6)? Won’t we be uniting Jesus’ body to impurity if we share the marriage bed with an unbeliever (6:15)?’²⁸

They are made holy!

So Paul deals with that objection head on in v.14. Paul answers them, ‘No the believing spouse is *not* made unclean, v.14 “For the unbelieving husband is *made holy* because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is *made holy* because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.” Astonishing! ‘Wife your unbelieving husband does not make you impure, FOR he is ‘made holy’ *because of you*. Husband, your unbelieving wife does not make

²⁸ Calvin puts it like this “[Paul] answers an objection, which might occasion anxiety to believers. The relationship of marriage is singularly close, so that the wife is the half of the man--so that they two are one flesh--(1 Cor. 6:16)--so that the husband is the head of the wife; (Eph. 5:23) and she is her husband's partner in everything; hence it seems impossible that a believing husband should live with an ungodly wife, or the converse of this, without being polluted by so close a connection...it might seem (judging from appearance) as if a believing wife contracted infection from an unbelieving husband, so as to make the connection unlawful...” Calvin, pg. 241

you impure, FOR she is ‘made holy’ *because of you.* Now God-willing we will deal with the children being holy next week. For now, consider what Paul means here by calling the unbelieving spouse holy.²⁹

What does he mean? He doesn’t mean they are saved through their believing spouse—v.12 and v.13 make it clear they are an unbeliever. Unbelievers are by definition not saved. Rather *holy* here means they are set-apart. There is a “set-apartness” that the unbelieving spouse is subject to, that they didn’t experience for. They are now “‘set apart’ to receive a [constant] Christian witness and influence.”³⁰ Their most intimate friend in life now prays and reads their Bible, and goes to Church. They have been transformed, they are a new creature altogether. That has such powerful influence on the unbelieving spouse, that Paul calls them “holy.” As one author said, a “sacred environment” has been created in the home, that the unbelieving spouse can’t get away from. They are set-apart from their former life.

“Religious differences are no reason to leave a marriage”

So Paul’s argument to the Corinthians is this: ‘No you are not defiled by the unbeliever; the opposite is true, they are brought under the influence of your godliness.’³¹ Therefore if the unbeliever willingly consents to live with you dear believer, you are not allowed to divorce them. “Religious differences³² are no reason to end the marriage.”³³ What this means dear believer is that if you are in a mixed marriage, you need to guard yourself from leaving your spouse in other ways. Perhaps the temptation will be to immerse yourself in the Church or

²⁹ Why can a Christian husband or wife convey holiness *in some sense* to an unbelieving spouse *but not* to a prostitute? Remember Paul forbid the use of prostitutes in **6:15-18**. The answer is simple. Prostitution is always outside of God’s will. But marriage is not. Marriage remains a Divine and holy institution *regardless* if it is made up of Christians or non-Christians.

³⁰ Ciampa & Rosner, pg. 300

³¹ “The godliness of the one does more to ‘sanctify’ the marriage than the uncleanness of the other does to make it unclean.” Riddlebarger, pg. 177

³² What about Ezra 10:3,19? See Reformation Heritage Study Bible notes

³³ Ciampa & Rosner, pg. 295.

Christian friends and leave your unbelieving spouse to themselves. But that does not honor the Lord. He still commands husbands to love your wives as Christ loved the Church, he commands wives that just as the Church submits to Christ, so they should submit in everything to their husbands.³⁴ You cannot use your faith to disobey the Lord's commands to love your unbelieving spouse. Your unbelieving spouse should see in you such self-sacrificing love that is now more committed to your marriage and blessing them than ever before.³⁵

The lamentable end

Paul only gives one alternative, and it ought to be lamentable to all of us. Please look at v.15 "But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so."³⁶ Here is what the WCF gets their language of desertion: "willful desertion...is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage" (24.6). Now what if a believer is deserted by another believer, because the verse only says "if the unbelieving partner separates." Well if a believer abandons their Christian spouse, then this is where the Church must step in and start the process of Church discipline. This is not allowed. And if the believer insists and persists in their sin, then they will eventually be excommunicated and considered an unbeliever. Then this verse applies to them as well. Paul continues halfway through v.15 "In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved." You are not *enslaved*, meaning you

³⁴ Ephesians 5:24-25

³⁵ "Some unbelievers feel threatened by the conversion of a spouse to Christ, as they now live with someone whose ultimate loyalties and commitment is beyond their understanding, and not all recover from the experience. Unfortunately, new converts may also need to be warned about the subconscious temptation to start life over again and find a believing spouse by "locking-out" their unbelieving spouse and completely immersing themselves in their new Christian world to the point that their spouse feels completely abandoned and estranged from them and finally gives up and divorces the believer. The unbelieving spouse of a Christian ought to find in them a model of self-sacrificing love that is even more committed to the health of the marriage and to blessing their spouse than ever before, such that only a radical prejudice could explain their unwillingness to continue in the marriage." Ciampa & Rosner, pg. 303

³⁶ This "separation" is not merely a failure to fulfill one's vows - see Newheiser, pg. 226

are freed lawfully from the bond of marriage.³⁷ In such a case, the Christian would be free to remarry.³⁸ Paul says end of v.15 “God has called you to peace.” Meaning, “...be at peace as you find yourself free from your former [marriage].”³⁹ How could Paul say this if the believer was still bound to the marriage?

Are there other forms of abandonment?

We have to ask here: are there other forms of abandonment that would free the believer from the marriage? For instance what about habitual physical abuse? I believe those Reformers are correct who argue that spouses who are victims of particular sins which are equal in extremity and severity to *actual desertion*, are freed from the marriage covenant. The PCA Position Paper on Divorce and Remarriage says this:

“...a husband’s violence, particularly to the degree that it endangers his wife’s safety, if unremedied...[is] as much as much a ruination of the marriage in fact as adultery or [desertion]...his violence separates them, either by her forced withdrawal from the home or by the profound cleavage between them which the violence produces, as surely as would his own departure, and is thus an expression of his unwillingness “to consent” to live with her in marriage.”⁴⁰

³⁷ “If the unbeliever broke up the marriage, the Christian partner was thereby liberated from the contract. This is the interpretation which Protestants have almost universally given to this verse. It is a passage of great importance, because it is the foundation of Protestant doctrine that willful desertion is a legitimate ground of divorce.” Hodge, pg. 118. See Paul’s same logic on being freed from the marriage in 1 Corinthians 7:39 and Romans 7:1-3. “Although a different verb is used to refer to the “bondage” of marriage in v.39 and Romand 7:2, in both of those texts Paul explicitly refers to the freedom gained upon the dissolution of a marriage as freedom to remarry.” Ciampa & Rosner, pg. 303. Also see the PCA Position Paper pg. 227

³⁸ See Newheiser pg. 223 & 257.

³⁹ PCA Position Paper, pg. 227

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 228

Continual physical abuse expresses that that a spouse is not willing “to consent” to live with their spouse as Paul says in **v.12-13**.⁴¹ This seems to be legitimate grounds for divorce. One of the difficulties with these cases, is that they can open up the floodgates for other justifications for divorce. This is where you need the help of the Church. You need pastors to counsel you and pray through this with you. There are some incredibly difficult situations, and God doesn’t call you to walk through these by yourself.⁴²

Perhaps you will save your spouse

Now Paul ends by giving those in mixed marriages the highest motive to stay in the marriage *if the unbeliever consents to stay*.⁴³ **v.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?” What a thought! If you are in a mixed marriage, you could be the instrument the Lord uses to rescue your spouse from the wrath of God, to bring them into a relationship with the Redeemer.

That’s Paul’s counsel: dear believer, be willing to you sacrifice your comfort and preferences and desires for a greater good, perhaps you will save your spouse! Aren’t tears and loneliness and frustration worth that? Isn’t your own light and momentary suffering worth the possibility of bringing your spouse into eternal glory?

⁴¹ Also see Newheiser’s chapter: “Is Abuse Grounds For Divorce?” pg. 259ff

⁴² Can the unbeliever “separate” without leaving the home? See Newheiser’s chapter: “What Constitutes Abandonment by an Unbelieving Spouse?” pg. 254ff

⁴³ I know this is a debated verse between commentators. The question is, does the “for” connect to the command to stay in v.12-13, or the command to leave in v.15. If it is connected to v.15, then it is a pessimistic word from Paul, i.e. ‘Why persist in keeping up the connection, when, O wife, you know not whether you can save your husband.’ But I believe it connects to v. 12-13 and ends on an optimistic note. See Ciampa & Rosner, pg. 304-306; and Hodge, pg. 119-120. Consider how Scripture a similar phrase “how do you know” in an optimistic way in 2 Samuel 12:22; Esther 4:14; Joel 2:14; and Jonah 3;9

What you ask is impossible

But maybe you're saying: "what you ask is impossible. You don't know my situation. I'm not respected, I'm not loved. My spouse acts like they hate me. I dread going home. I dread sleeping the same bed. Though I continue to love them, they do not love me in return. You can't understand the suffering I have to endure." Maybe I don't understand.

But there is Someone who does.

The dialog between Father and Son

Several centuries ago, a Puritan pastor John Flavel imagined what the conversation might have been like between God the Father and God the Son before Jesus came into the world in order to help believers stop complaining when they find it hard to obey Christ:

Father: My Son, here is a company of poor miserable souls that have utterly undone themselves and now lie open to my justice! Justice demands satisfaction for them *or* will satisfy itself in the eternal ruin of them. What shall be done for these souls?

Son: O my Father, such is my love to and pity for them that, rather than they shall perish eternally, I will be responsible for them as their Surety. Bring in all Thy bills, that I may see what they owe Thee. Lord, bring them all in, that there may be no after-reckonings with them. At my hand shall you require it. I will rather choose to suffer Thy wrath than they should suffer it. Upon me, my Father, upon me be all their debt.

Father: But my Son, if Thou undertake for them, Thou must reckon to pay the last mite. Expect no [pity].⁴⁴ If I spare them, I will not spare Thee.

⁴⁴ Original — "abatements"

Son: Content, Father. Let it be so. Charge it all upon me. I am able to discharge it. And though it prove a kind of undoing to me, though it impoverish all my riches, empty all my treasures, yet I am content to undertake it."⁴⁵

The story God is telling in your marriage

What did it take for Christ to redeem you? Everything. You were *entirely* the wrong person for Him. What love and respect did you show Him, that would attract Him to You. You were born a wretched sinner. Though He has continued to draw near to you, you have rebuffed Him again and again. You have returned His kindness with complaining, His love with lust, His mercy with malice. But Christ never gave up on You dear believer. He made Himself nothing, He took the form of a servant, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. Jesus endured all suffering—He paid the last mite—so that you would be saved. Can you not repay Him with obedience? He tasted death for you and rose from the dead so that You would live. Can you not endure a little suffering for a lost spouse? Don't you see? God is telling the greatest story through your marriage.

The wedding feast to come

If you are an unbeliever this morning—the ones the Paul speaks about in our passage—you have no power to stay in a difficult marriage. But that is not your biggest problem. There is another marriage that you are in danger of missing. Jesus said “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave wedding feast for his son.”⁴⁶ In this parable, the king invited all to come. But there the people of that country were wicked and they would not come. They killed the king's servants, so the king sent his troops and destroyed them and burned their city. Then the king sent his servants out again, this time further out to invite as many as they could find. When the day of the wedding

⁴⁵ Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ*, (Carlisle, PA.,: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), pg. 17-18

⁴⁶ Matthew 22:2

arrived, there was a guest who came in with no wedding garment. This was unheard of. The king told his servants to bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness.

What does this parable mean?

There are two ways you can miss the great wedding of God and His people at the end of this age. One way is you can simply refuse the invitation. You heard what will happen to you if you refuse. The other is that you think you can enter this wedding with your own garments on—that is, with your own good deeds. If you attempt that, you will be cast out. The only way that you can enter that celebration on the last day is if you are wearing the righteous garments of Jesus Christ. How do you get those garments? By receiving Jesus the way a bride receives a groom—you trust Him, you receive Him, you turn away from your other lovers in repentance. If you do that, He will take your sin, and He will give you His righteousness, and you will never be cast out.