

**Armagh Baptist Church: Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2019**  
**Issues Facing Christians Today – Part 3**  
**Marriage & Divorce in Paul's Letters - 1**  
**(1 Corinthians 7:1-24)**

**Introduction**

We are currently going through a series of questions that were raised by our members under the broad heading: **Issues Facing Christians Today**.

So as we continue to answer questions around Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage, tonight we're going to be looking at Marriage & Divorce in the N.T. (esp. 1 Cor.7)

We come tonight to deal with a passage that gives further grounds for legitimate divorce, beyond what Jesus said in Matthew ch.19. Paul bases his teaching here very much on what Jesus said in Matt.19, but he applies that teaching to the practical pastoral problems that were arising as the Gospel made its impact on pagan lives in Corinth and brought them into the Church of Christ!

I was living in the Republic of Ireland when Divorce Laws came in there just a few years ago, as the result of a Referendum. Prior to that there was no divorce in the Republic of Ireland, but there were many broken marriages!

Some people campaigned for 'No divorce,' while others campaigned to say "Yes" to Divorce in Ireland. I suspect that "Christians" tended to vote "No" – against Divorce, because they believed they were up-holding the high standard for life-long marriage that we find in the Bible. And there is no escaping that.

The Bible does, again and again, teach the life-long exclusive relationship between one man and one woman. Marriage is for life: "Till death us do part." And whenever Jesus was asked about divorce in Matthew 19, that's exactly where he started his answer – by reiterating the life-long exclusive commitment between two people that was always taught in God's Word, since Genesis ch.2.

But to say that there is 'No divorce' in the Bible is wrong. To say that all divorce is prohibited and that it shouldn't be allowed in **any** circumstances is to over-simplify the teaching of the Bible. It is true that it says in Malachi, "*God hates divorce.*" But then doesn't God hate *everything* that has entered his world as a result of the Fall? – God hates **all** sin!

The Ten Commandments set out a very high standard on a whole range of issues, but that doesn't alter the fact that *none* of us is able to live up to those standards. We all break them. And if "*there's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin*" – **all sin**, then there must also be a way back to God from the heartbreak of divorce and a broken marriage as well.

So we need to be careful as Christians that we don't sit in our ivory towers, and castigate anybody whose marriage has broken down, or distance ourselves from those who are divorced for whatever reason.

We might never face divorce ourselves, but does that mean that we have perfect marriages behind the scenes today? Not necessarily. Some Christian marriages are rocky enough at times! So let's give our careful attention to this matter tonight as we look at 1 Cor.7:1-24.

As always, the Bible sets out **a picture of a healthy marriage** before it deals with a broken marriage. Jesus did this, as I said, in Matthew 19. He reminded them of life-long marriage, before he taught about divorce. Paul does it here as well in 1 Corinthians 7:1-7.

Notice first of all in v.1 that Paul is writing in answer to some question or other that the Corinthians had specifically asked him – probably in a letter they'd sent to him.

In fact most of the rest of 1 Corinthians is dealing with questions that they asked: (e.g. 7:1,25, Marriage. 8:1, Food sacrificed to Idols. 12:1, Spiritual Gifts. 15:1, The Resurrection. 16:1 Giving to the needy).

The problem is, we don't know exactly what the questions were – so we have to piece the evidence together from Paul's answers, to try to find out.

The question behind the first part of ch.7 was probably something like:  
*"Is it better for a Christian to get married or stay single?"* Or maybe  
*"Is the Celibate lifestyle a more spiritual alternative than Marriage?"*

(This is something that is still being debated to this day, particularly as far as the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church is concerned.)

Well, throughout this chapter Paul puts that choice back to each individual to decide before the Lord. What is best for you? What is God's Will for you? But he certainly nowhere gives the impression that staying single makes you holier than those who get married. Each state, marriage or singleness, is equally a gift from God (v.7). But he does set out the pros and cons for each:

(v.1). It is good for a man to stay single – for him not to marry... (i.e. singleness is good - cf. v.28).

(v.2). But because there is so much immorality in the world, each one should have their own life partner... (i.e. marriage is good too). We all have natural sexual appetites that need to be satisfied. God's will is that it be done within the marriage bond – within a lifelong commitment.

That's what he says in vs.3-5.

Here we have the Biblical picture of a healthy marriage, and it involves each partner fulfilling and satisfying the physical needs of their marriage partner, as well as everything else.

We need to remember that in our marriage vows we give ourselves each to the other, including our bodies. *'With my body I thee worship'* - The physical side of marriage is just as important as the spiritual, or any other aspect.

According to v.5, we need to make sure we have balanced marriages. There are various aspects of a marriage relationship and we need to attend to them all, if it is to continue to be a healthy marriage.

**Paul tells us in vs.8 & 9 that he himself is not married – He says he is “unmarried”.** Now I want you to see that this is an important term in this chapter. And we need to see what it means exactly, because it is a key to understanding this chapter.

Paul uses 3 terms in this chapter to refer to people who are not married. So there are three distinct groups:

The **widows** (v.8) - People whose marriages came to an end because of the death of their spouse.

Then there are **virgins (NIV) or betrothed (ESV)** (vs.25 & 28) - They not only have never been married, but they have never had sexual relations either.

But there is a third group: “the **unmarrieds**” (v.8 & v.34) - who are they?

Now that could just be a collective term for widows and virgins together – but it's not – not the way Paul uses it. The way Paul uses it, it is a distinct third group of people who are *'not married'*.

N.B. He uses this term *'unmarried'* alongside *widows* in v.8, and he uses it alongside *betrothed* in v.34, and in v.28 he shows that *unmarrieds* and *betrothed* are not the same group. So *unmarrieds* are neither *betrothed* or *widows*.

**The word for “Unmarried” in the Greek is “agamos”** gamos (married) and the negative “a” - not married or unmarried.

But if *unmarrieds* are not *betrothed*, and they're not *widows*, then what are they? They must be people who used to be married but are now not married.

Dr. John MacArthur (USA) sees *'unmarrieds'* as people who were *'formerly married'*: people who used to be married, but whose marriages came to an end, not because of death (they'd be *widows*), but because of marital breakdown.

If that is correct, then this passage becomes very helpful for us today indeed, since we are living again in a culture and in a generation where marriage-breakdown is very much on the increase.

If we see in this passage the *widows* as **widows**, the *betrothed* as **singles**, and the *unmarrieds* as **formerly married**, then this chapter is one we must know and understand thoroughly, because it helps us in so many pastoral situations that we will face today as we seek to reach out with the Gospel to a lost and pagan world - a world that has turned its back on the standards of the Bible as far as morality is concerned.

**Some think that Paul himself might have belonged to this group of people – ‘the unmarrieds’!**

At the time Paul was writing 1 Corinthians he was *not married* (see v.8). But that's not to say he was *never married*. In fact there is good reason to believe that he must have been married at one time. Paul had been a Pharisee, and probably a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Ruling Council before his conversion to Christ. To be a member of the Sanhedrin you had to fulfil two qualifications among others – You had to be 30 yrs of age at least, and you had to be married. Paul wasn't married now, but he must have been married previously. Either his wife must have died, or there could be another explanation... Did his wife leave him when he got converted? This is a particular situation that he deals with in vs.12-16 of this chapter. Either way, Paul specifically links *his situation* with the people who used to be married in v.8. Nowhere in this passage does he link his own situation with the *'betrothed'* or the *'virgins'* (the never marrieds) in the same way.

So bearing all that in mind, let's take a look at this passage together:

### **1. Two Believers who are Married (vs.1-11)**

Taking that as our understanding of these terms, this passage becomes clearer.

Since Paul is writing in answer to the question asked him by the **believers** in Corinth, we can assume that the marriage he talks about in vs.1-11 is a marriage between two believers. So this is the ideal. They have each other. They should appreciate each other. Not only that they can fulfil each other's needs physically, but also they can relate spiritually to each other as well – in terms of praying

together, or allowing each other time and space to pray on their own (v.5), or to be involved in the Lord's work.

But vs.10-11 then becomes clearer as well. It is to a couple where both are Christians that Paul says, "*A wife must not separate from her husband*" - and that's a command from the Lord, not just from Paul. Two Believers must not separate (v.10).

*But if they do separate*, they must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to their spouse. As two believers, *Biblically*, they have no other option (unless of course one of them has committed adultery with someone else).

Either they stay together, or else if they separate because their relationship has broken down, they must remain unmarried, or else seek reconciliation. They are not to get divorced, if they are both believers (v.11).

So as we have said before, divorce is never the first option when a marriage hits difficulties. Particularly if you are both believers, counselling and real attempts at reconciliation, must be your first priority. Not only for the sake of your own testimony, but also for the testimony of your church.

## **2. Widows and formerly marrieds who are now believers (vs.8-9)**

Verses 8 & 9 refer to someone who comes to faith in Christ and they are either a widow, or they are separated, already. What should they do?

Paul says, it's good if you can stay as you are, just like him: '***unmarried.***'

And if Paul did *use to be* married, then he knows exactly how they feel, but he still says it. If you can stay as you are, do so, but if you can't stay as you are, then get married (see vs.39-40). He says it is better to get married than to "*burn with passion*" (v.9) i.e. wanting to be married - needing the close intimacy that only marriage can bring.

Notice he says this, not just to widows, but also to those who were previously married - people whose marriages broke up for whatever reason before they were saved. Better you marry again, than to burn with passion. (See vs.27b-28). "Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. *But if you do marry, you have not sinned.*" (i.e. If you came to Christ as a divorcee).

Truly "*If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come.*" (2 Cor. 5:17). Conversion wipes the slate clean. God allows you to start afresh, even if others don't. In God's eyes, divorce is not the unforgivable sin, even if sadly some Christians think that it is!

## **3. A Believer whose partner has not got saved (vs.12-16)**

(v.12) "To *the rest* I say this." - Who are "the rest?"

Well v.12 makes it clear who "the rest" are. "*If any brother* (i.e. a believer) *has a wife who is an unbeliever.*" These verses deal with a marriage where one person is a Christian and the other is not. This is often called an unequal yoke, sometimes called a mixed marriage – in the true theological sense of that phrase: a believer married to an unbeliever.

Let me say 3 things about the unequal yoke:

***(i) Such marriages should not be entered deliberately, if you are already a Christian.***

See 2 Cor.6:14-15 & 1 Cor.7:39 – '*He must belong to the Lord!*' (only in the Lord).

But the Gospel was new to Corinth. Often it came into existing homes, where one partner got saved and the other one didn't! What happens then?

If we were both pagans, but now one of us is a Christian, does 2 Cor.6:14 still apply to us? "*Should I leave my unsaved partner?*" seems to be the question that Paul has been asked in the letter he got from them.

What does Paul have to say about this?

***(ii) Such marriages should not be left automatically, if you become a Christian.***

He says No! If the unsaved partner is willing to live with you, even though you are now a Christian, then stay together – don't separate or divorce! (vs.12-13) How come?

How can I live a holy life as a Christian, if I'm married to a pagan? (2 Cor.6:17).

Well, Paul says in v.14a, that instead of the unbeliever defiling the believer, the unbeliever is actually in some way "made holy" or "set apart" or "blessed" by the believing partner. The believer is now a godly influence in the home. So it's OK to stay married in such a situation, even though it's an unequal yoke.

But notice what Paul goes on to say about such a situation...

***(iii) Such marriages can only be dissolved if the unbeliever decides to depart.***

In vs.12-13 the believer was told to stay, but if the unbeliever leaves... then the believer is to *“let it be so.”* (v.15) or ‘let them do so.’ (NIV)

Why? “Because God has called **you** to peace.” (v.15b)

- Because even if you force them to stay there is no **guarantee** that they, as your unbelieving spouse, will actually get saved (v.16).
- The reason for the break-up of this marriage is because the unbeliever doesn’t want Christianity at all!
- So Paul says in v.15, that a believing man or woman “is **not bound**” or *‘not enslaved’* (ESV) in such cases.

This usually means not bound to their marriage covenant, therefore this surely means that they would be free to re-marry in the future, someone who belongs to the Lord. (v.39)

So just as **adultery** of a marriage partner is a ground for divorce and remarriage in Matthew chs.5 & 19, so here we have a further ground for divorce and remarriage. We can call it **spiritual desertion**: when one person in a marriage has got saved, and their partner hasn’t, and they really don’t want anything to do with Christianity, and they leave for that reason – the believer is not bound in such circumstances. You can *‘let it be so.’*

Now at first sight, vs.17-24 doesn’t seem to fit in this chapter.

But 3 times in that section you get the same message (v.17, v.20, & v.24). It’s this: Whatever situation you were in when God called and saved you, stay there, because God has put you there (v.7); until He shows you differently (v.24).

## Conclusion

So as well as **Adultery** being legitimate grounds for divorce in Matt 5 & 19.

**Desertion** by an unbelieving spouse, because they don’t want your newfound faith in their home, seems to be another legitimate ground for divorce.

**But for all other situations 1 Cor 7:10-11 applies.** If your marriage can’t stay together, and you have to part for any other reason, then the point here is very clear – you **‘must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled’** to your spouse – particularly if both of you claim to be believers!

So **Divorce** is never the first option.

**Reconciliation** should be your first concern.

Only when reconciliation fails should separation or divorce be considered, because Biblically you could be consigning yourself to a life of singleness.

(Unless your marriage broke up because of the adultery of your spouse, Or because they just couldn’t stand the fact that you had become a believer).

Only on those two grounds, would you have any Biblical warrant for getting married again to someone else. But if you do, *‘they must belong to the Lord’* - in other words, don’t make the same mistake twice! (*‘Only in the Lord’*)

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We’ll complete this chapter next time, looking at Singleness (Sun night 28<sup>th</sup> April).

Then we’ll finish this series by looking at Paul’s teaching on Marriage in that great passage picturing Christ and His Bride, the Church, in Ephesians ch.5, in May.