

1 CORINTHIANS 7:8-16

INTRODUCTION

In Great Britain 1 in every 3 marriages end in divorce and that figure could soon become 1 in every 2, as it is the USA. Today love is loudly acclaimed and sought after but sadly it is greatly lacking; even within marriages there is a real lack of true love.

Now marriage problems are not unique to modern times, every generation has had them and they certainly existed in the New Testament times and the church at Corinth was greatly affected by marriage problems and marriage breakdown. Paul in this chapter gives some clear guidelines in order to help with the many situations that arose in Corinth concerning marriage divorce and singleness etc.

Last time we saw that marriage is the norm for most Christians but that singleness is a gift from God and it must not be despised. Now in these verses that we are looking at Paul applies that basic truth to four groups of believers that worshipped at Corinth.

1. GUIDELINES FOR SINGLE CHRISTIANS (vs. 8-9)

Paul mentions two categories of single people in these verses; those who are “unmarried” and those who are “widows.” In verse 25 Paul talks about a third group those who are “virgins.” The term virgin clearly refers to those who are single and have never been married. The word widow refers to single people who formerly were married but were severed from that relationship through the death of their spouse.

But who exactly are the group that Paul calls the unmarried? The Greek word used for unmarried is used only four times in the New Testament and all four are in this chapter. In verse 32 we are given no hint as to its possible meaning but in verse 34 Paul talks about an unmarried woman and a virgin, it seems right to assume that Paul has two groups in mind here so whoever the unmarried are they are not virgins.

In verse 8 Paul talks about the unmarried and widows so we can say that the unmarried are not the widows of the church. The clearest insight into the meaning of the Greek word comes to us in verses 10-11 where the term “unmarried” is referring to those who had previously been married but are now divorced. It seems that Paul in using this Greek word “unmarried” to refer to divorcees and most modern commentators that I read seem to agree with this view. Paul is probably dealing with the situation of those women who were divorced before they came to faith in Christ. Such women would want to know if they had the right to remarry. Paul’s advice to them is to remain single if possible.

In other words he is affirming what he said earlier that there is nothing wrong with being single and that there are advantages in being single. There is no need for those who once were married and now find themselves single to rush into marriage again.

Singleness as we saw last week has many advantages and therefore marriage or should I say remarriage should not be rushed into. Likewise those of us who are married should not speak of singleness as inferior or should not hint that single people whether widowed or divorced or whatever should seek marriage again. For in doing so it gives the impression that marriage is superior and that singleness is falling short somehow.

That is not the case, as Paul has already made clear in this chapter. However Paul also lives in the real world and he knows that the temptations that single people face are also very real and powerful. As we saw last week sexual temptation is very powerful and if a single person is unable

to exercise self-control in the area of sex then such people should seek marriage. It is better for them to be remarried than to burn with uncontrolled passions. A single Christian cannot live a happy and fulfilled life if that person is continually burning with sexual desire and passion.

In Corinthian society like in our own society immorality was so common and even accepted and that the opportunities to indulge in sexual immorality were often overwhelming and therefore resisting such temptations was extremely difficult and took someone to be very self controlled in order not to yield to it. However this does not mean that the Christian should marry anyone in order to stop them falling into immorality.

It is never right to marry an unbeliever (2 Corinthians 6:14) and we should not just marry the first Christian person to say yes. We need to seek the Lord on this matter and ask the Lord to bring the right person along our pathway. Until He does we ought to give ourselves totally to walking in his ways and seek the Lord's help in overcoming the many sexual temptations that single people face day after day.

2. GUIDELINES FOR CHRISTIAN MARRIAGES (vs.10-11)

Paul now turns his attention to Christian marriages, which might be tempted to adopt this world's policies and break up. It is clear that it is Christian marriages that he has in mind because in verses 12-16 he deals specifically with marriages in which only one partner is a believer. Now Paul does not give any advice here but he is reminding the church of a command that the Lord has already given.

This is why he says "not I but the Lord." What he means is that this is something that Jesus spoke of and gave clear commands about and therefore Paul is simply reminding them of these commands (Matthew 5:5-8 and Matthew 5:31-32).

Jesus teaching is consistent with the Old Testament where God says he hates divorce (Malachi 2:16) for divorce is contrary to God's plan for marriage and where God does allow divorce on the grounds of adultery he does so as a gracious concession to the innocent party in a situation where there is no sign of repentance. However it is clear that when repentance takes place then there is every chance that a marriage that is broken because of unfaithfulness can be restored again to a healthy condition. The word that is translated "separated" has nothing to do with our idea of separation but it means to bring the marriage to an end it is talking about divorce.

Now it seems clear that there were some Christians who wanted to divorce their partners. We can assume that the partner is not guilty of martial unfaithfulness for God does allow divorce for such a case and therefore it would contradict what Paul is saying here.

People want to divorce for all sorts of reasons some feel unfulfilled in their marriages, others like a new start in life and so on but Paul says that no Christian is to divorce his partner for any other reason other than adultery. However once again Paul lives in the real world and he knows that there were Christians at Corinth who had already divorced their partner and others who would do so no matter what he says so he gives clear guidelines.

If you are divorced Paul says, even though you shouldn't be or if you are contemplating divorce even though you know it is wrong then you must realise that you have no choice but to stay unmarried for that divorce should not have happened. Actually Paul tells them that they do have a choice they can be reconciled again to their partner and start living as Christian married couples should live.

You see the reason why such people cannot remarry is that their marriage union has never been broken in God's eyes, a piece of paper that says one is divorced does not bring a marriage to an

end in God's eyes only death or adultery or possibly desertion (v 15) brings a marriage to an end in God's eyes. If Christians get divorced for any other reason then they must remain in such a condition for they cannot be remarried for in God's eyes their marriage union has not be broken.

I have been in the Christian ministry for long enough to see this happen in Christian marriages. There are sadly Christians who have been divorced because of all sorts of reasons, reasons that the bible says does not give them the right to be divorced. However once a divorce has gone through then the law of the land says they are divorced even if they are not in God's eyes.

Therefore such Christians simply must remain unmarried they should not seek marriage but must remain in their condition or if possible they could be reconciled to the original partner and be remarried to that person since in the eyes of God they were never divorced.

Christian couples here tonight we must do all that we can to strengthen our marriages so that we will not be tempted into divorce. When our marriages are facing problems and all marriages do at sometime then we must deal with the problems in a biblical way. That can be painful and costly but it is the only way that anyone can have a strong marriage that will bring fulfilment and joy into our lives.

There are many Christians who live as Christians should in many areas but when it comes to dealing with marriage problems they behave as unbelievers. I know that is because marriage problems involve our emotions in a greater way than other problems but we must deal with every problem from the biblical perspective if we are really going to live godly lives in this world, which is happy to break up marriages for any and every reason.

We must pray for Christian marriages that they will be strong and that Christian couples will apply God's word to their marriages and that the result will be that the church will set an example on marriage to this broken and hurting world.

3. GUIDELINES FOR CHRISTIANS MARRIED TO UNBELIEVERS (vs. 12-16)

Paul now raises the problem of what Christians are to do when they are already married to unbelievers when they become Christians. Are they free to divorce their non-Christian partner and live either as a single person or even are they able to marry a Christian. These are honest questions especially in the light of Paul's teaching about our bodies being the temple of the Holy Spirit (6:15-20).

It seems that the Corinthians were concerned about whether to maintain martial union with an unbeliever and if they do are the children from that marriage dishonouring the Lord? On top of this the desire to have a Christian partner whom you could share your Christian faith with and encourage one another was also very strong. Now Jesus did not say anything directly about this issue, which is why Paul says, "to the rest I say not the Lord" (v 12).

This is not a denial of inspiration or an indication that Paul is only giving his opinion. What Paul is saying is that God has not given any previous revelation on this subject but now God was declaring what should be done through the Apostle Paul.

There was no scripture that Paul could turn to and apply in this situation so Paul now gives the principles needed but we must remember that as he speaks this is God's word that he is speaking so it is God who speaks into this situation and therefore this word is full of authority. The teaching is very clear and it deals with two particular situations

a) Unbelievers who are married to Christians and want to stay in those marriages (vs. 12-14). - If a Christian husband is married to an unbelieving wife or vice visa and they are happy to continue

living with the Christian partner then they should remain married. Christians married to unbelievers were not to think that somehow they themselves, or their marriage or the children from that marriage would somehow be defiled by the unbelieving spouse (v 14).

In fact the very opposite is the case both the unbelieving spouse and the children are sanctified through the believing spouse. In this case the word “sanctified” (v 14) is not referring to salvation but it refers to being “set apart.” In other words because one member of the family is a Christian that home is set apart for God from God’s perspective. Such a home is not a Christian home is the full sense of that word but it is in a better position than a home that is totally unbelieving.

Even if the Christian partner in the home is ridiculed and persecuted unbelievers in the home know something of Christian influence upon them, they know something of God’s grace in the home. After all God indwells that Christian partner in the home and all the blessings and graces that flow into the believers life will spill over and enrich that family and that home.

Now if you are married to an unbelieving husband or wife then understand that your influence in that home is immeasurable. The blessings that you enjoy from the hand of God will affect your partner and children in some way and your house is in a more favourable position than an unbelieving one because of the Christian influence.

So although you might like to see your partner come to Christ and your children find him for themselves you ought to be encouraged to know that your influence in that home is great and who knows God might use your influence to bring others in your home to salvation in Christ Jesus.

Therefore Paul’s point is do not worry about being married to an unbelieving partner. Stay with him or her for God has placed you in that home and as a result your partner and your children benefit from God’s blessings and influence in your home in a way that unbelieving homes don't

b) Unbelievers who are married to Christians and do not want to stay in those marriages (vs.15-16). – Now Paul addresses a difficult problem. What happens when a man or a woman are converted to Christ and their partner does not like that and wants to break up the marriage. This we might assume was not uncommon in Corinth and in many other cities during the first century. When one is converted your life is turned upside down, you have new loves and new desires and new goals.

These may anger unbelieving partners and might cause them to desire to break up the marriage. Some at Corinth clearly didn’t want to be married to someone who was committed and devoted to Christ. So what should a believer do in such a situation? The answer Paul gives is that there is nothing you can do. If your unbelieving partner is keen to leave you because you are a Christian then all you can do is let him or her do so. The word “leave” (v 15) clearly means to end the marriage so if an unbelieving partner proceeds with divorce then there is nothing a Christian can do but grant your partner his or her wishes.

But what does God think of such a situation. If God hates divorce then surely a Christian should contest divorce proceedings and so on. But Paul says that the Christian is not bound in such circumstances. This word “bound” has been debated and discussed by Scholars but most people believe it means that the Christian is no longer bound in marriage to that person from God’s perspective.

If this is the case and it seems to me to be a reasonable understanding of the verse then there are three reasons that God recognises for divorce. One is death the second one is adultery and now the third reason is desertion. I presume that if you can remarry after the death of your partner and after a divorce on the grounds of adultery then it must be allowable in the case of desertion.

It seems to me that in Scripture whenever legitimate divorce occurs remarriage is assumed. The reason why God allows divorce in the case of desertion is because Christians are called to live in peace and if an unbelieving husband or wife cannot tolerate the spouse's faith and desires to be free from their marriage union then it is better that the marriage is dissolved in order to preserve peace.

Now once again this is a concession and it is only on the grounds of desertion because of one's faith. This sort of thing happens when Muslims are converted to Christ and are disowned by the family and by their partners. However let me make clear; we are not to seek divorce so that there can be peace in the home. Many Christian couples justify their divorces by the fact that they are always fighting and surely we are called to live in peace.

The context makes it clear here that divorce is only permitted if it is the unbelieving partner who no longer wishes to live in the married state because their partner has been converted to Christ.

However many Christian partners will want to stick with their marriage even though their unbelieving partner has made it clear that they want out. Perhaps the Christian feels able to influence their unbelieving partner so that God might save their partner through their Christian witness and influence (v 16). Paul's point is no one knows if that will happen. The Christian prays that God might use their witness and influence to save their spouse but no one knows if that will happen.

Only God knows that and therefore evangelism is not a reason for a Christian to deny their partner a divorce if their partner wants one because they simply cannot live with a Christian.

Christians should do all that is possible to work out their marriage with an unbelieving partner but if at the end of the day the unbeliever breaks the bonds of marriage by desertion then the Christian must not deny their unbelieving partner a divorce and as far as God is concerned the marriage is ended.

This is why we should thank God when an unbelieving partner is happy to stay married to a Christian and we should pray for that person's salvation. We also should pray for those who have been divorced perhaps because of adultery or desertion and ask God to help them live for him in their new state of singleness.

Amen