

## **The Sanctifying Power of Committed Love** (1 Corinthians 7:10-16)

We are living in a time where people are said to have **commitment issues**. This is a major problem. As Neil Strauss explained, “Without commitment you cannot have depth in anything whether it’s a relationship, a business or hobby.” Commitment issues can extend to various aspects of a person’s life (i.e. career, going to college, joining a church, going to the gym, buying a house, etc.). But often times when people speak of commitment issues their aversion to commitment has to do with relationships, especially romantic relationships.

There are various reasons given for why people have commitment issues. Some of them can be self-centered reasons, like wanting to be free to play the field, or always thinking that the grass is greener on the other side. There can also be more complex, and deep-rooted issues for why a person may be a commitment phobe. It could be, for example, a past abusive relationship or a traumatic family upbringing.

The message this morning will not necessarily address those complex issues. If you’re having commitment issues, I recommend that you sit down with a wise biblical counselor that can help you get at the root of your fear and show you how to apply gospel wisdom to overcome them.

What we will address this morning from God’s word is the foundational counter-cultural connection between **love and commitment** in relationships, especially in a marital relationships. We learned last week that the purpose for why God gave the gift of marriage extends beyond pleasure and procreation. According to Ephesian 5:25-32, marriage is to be a picture of the oneness and committed love relationship between Christ and His bride the church. The relationship between Christ and the church is characterized not by self-fulfillment and self-gratification, but by a self-less and sacrificial love that is devoted to meeting the needs and interests of another (Philippians 2:4).

Marriage conference speaker Dave Willis wrote, “Great marriages don’t happen by luck or by accident. They are the result of a consistent investment of time, thoughtfulness, forgiveness, affection, prayer, mutual respect and a rock-solid commitment between a husband and wife.”

**Main idea:** Demonstrating committed love, especially in a difficult relationship, has sanctifying power to bring others to a saving knowledge of Jesus.

To unfold this theme, we are going to examine 3 sanctifying ways that committed love is displayed in relationships and in particular a marriage relationship.

## 1. Committed Love Remains

The first characteristic about committed love, which is foundational to a healthy marriage, is that committed love **remains**—committed love doesn’t look for a way out, it doesn’t look for an escape route.

Having made an appeal to embrace the gift of singleness, and after explaining to those who choose instead the gift of marriage about the selfless way that a couple is to give themselves to each other in the marriage bed, Paul writes:

*“To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband<sup>11</sup> (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.” (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).*

Although Paul understood the value of the gift of singleness to secure undivided devotion to Christ and His cause, he also understood marriage to be a lifelong covenant designed by God to show the committed love between Christ and the church (1 Corinthians 7:35; Ephesians 5:25). The reason that Paul exhorts Christian husbands and wives not to **separate** from their Christian spouses is because Jesus gave the same instructions in the gospels (Matthew 19:6). In addition, separa-

tion is antithetical (or contrary) to the redemptive and sanctifying purpose of marriage. God, who is a covenant keeping God, loves His people with a covenant love. And again, the ultimate purpose of marriage is to show God's covenant love.

The Hebrew word that describes God's covenant love in the Old Testament is *Hesed*. One of the numerous places we find this Hebrew word in the Old Testament is in Isaiah 54:10 where the prophet writes:

*“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love [hesed] shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you*” (Isaiah 54:10).

Avital Snow, Coordinator of Messianic Jewish studies at The King's University noted, *“Hesed* is one of the most fundamental characteristics of God, consistent with what we know about His covenantal nature.

Quoting bible scholar Darrell L. Bock, she continues: *Hesed* is “*wrapping up in itself all the positive attributes of God: love, covenant faithfulness, mercy, grace, kindness, loyalty—in short, acts of devotion and loving-kindness that go beyond the requirements of duty.*”

*Hesed*, God's committed and loyal love is more than a feeling; its love in action. One of the great displays of *hesed* in the Old Testament is seen in the life of Ruth. After fleeing Bethlehem because of a famine, Naomi, her husband and two sons settled in Moab. Naomi's two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Ten years later the unexpected happens, Naomi not only loses her husband, but her two sons also die, leaving her and her two daughters-in-law, widows. Naomi, who is all alone in a strange land, decides to return to the land of her people. Her two daughters-in-law also decide to go with her. Not seeing a future in Bethlehem for two foreign Moabite women, Naomi urges them to return home where in Naomi's mind the possibility of finding new husbands and the security of family life were greater. Orpah returns, but Ruth, who loved her Mother-in-law, clings to her and

decides to remain with her. When making the decision to remain with her mother-in-law, instead of separating, Ruth makes the following declaration: *“But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God”* (Ruth 1:16).

Ruth’s decision to leave the familiar and cleave to Naomi in her journey back to the promised land not only symbolizes God’s design for a covenant marriage, but also His committed love. Even from Naomi’s vantage point Ruth’s prospects for a better and happier life was found in leaving Naomi and going back to Moab. But instead Ruth decides to give up her rights, and leave the familiar land of her fathers to join Naomi. She committed to stay by Naomi’s side to travel with her down life’s road with no expectation or promise that it would be an easy road to travel.

Do you know that when Ruth chose to remain with Naomi, Naomi had nothing material to give her? Naomi herself was a broken woman who was in bitterness of soul because of the loss of her family. But Ruth would not leave Naomi even in this dark time in her life. Hesed is a love that won’t look for an escape when relationship gets hard and life hits you with the unexpected. Rather than looking for an escape, hesed love endures in the good times and in the hard times.

Will Kynes explained, “Hesed is never merely an abstract feeling of goodwill, but always entails practical action on behalf of another.”

How was Ruth able to show such commitment when she wasn’t going to get much in return for loving her mother-in-law with such sacrificial actions? No doubt when her Jewish husband was alive she heard about the Hesed—the steadfast love of the Lord. The loyal love that she showed to her Jewish mother-in-law was the fruit of beginning to know the covenant nature of God. And as she took steps of faith trusting in the covenant nature of God she too would know God’s faithfulness in tangible and providential ways. Ruth, through whom God demonstrated His committed love, would meet a godly man named

Boaz through whom God demonstrated to her His loyal, redeeming, saving and sanctifying love.

How can we demonstrate our love to God and His people? Avital Snow beautifully explains, “It is through a *hesed* kind of love that we worship Him and serve others. Through the abundance of *hesed* that God shows us, we can in turn be abundant in our expression of *hesed* love for others. This is a strengthening truth, a reliable foundation. No matter what you face, you can rely on God’s *hesed*. In the best way, His love is predictable, tenacious, and unchanging.”

There are numerous demonstrations of *hesed* in the lives of God’s people in the bible, but the greatest and fullest demonstration of all was shown in the incarnation of Jesus. Ruth left Moab to commit herself to Naomi. Jesus left heaven and exchanged his robe of glory for a robe of flesh to redeem us from sin and purchase us for Himself to be with Him for all eternity.

When Paul exhorts husbands and wives not to separate or divorce he said so because God intended marriage to be a lifelong covenant. And because the ultimate purpose of marriage is to display the committed love of God in Christ for the good of our spouses, for the good of our children, for the good of society and for the glory of Christ.

But now since a Christian marriage is not only a union between two redeemed people, but two imperfect people, who are both a work in progress, every marriage will experience difficulties and problems; some big and some small. Therefore, there’s a parenthesis between Paul’s exhortation to husbands and wives not to separate. He writes: “(but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), (1 Corinthians 7:10).

God intended marriage to be for life, but since marriage is between two imperfect people, who can sinfully lose their way, a separation or divorce can occur. In our text, Paul could be speaking of a **conflict** that leads to a separation, but not necessarily one that gives grounds for divorce. As we learned last week, the separation can be temporary

so that the husband and wife can devote themselves to an extended season of prayer or it can be a separation that provides a safe space in times of serious conflict.

Whatever the cause of the separation in marriage between two Christians, Paul instructs the wife, which applies to the husband also, to remain unmarried. Now in the case where a spouse has biblical grounds for divorce, namely when one engages in sexual immorality, remarriage is possible. However, even when there's infidelity, pursuing reconciliation and not divorce should be the first option. If you don't have biblical grounds for divorce, you don't have biblical grounds for remarriage (Matthew 19:9). But whether or not you have biblical grounds for divorce the Apostle Paul's Holy Spirit inspired counsel would be to remain unmarried. In fact, later in the chapter, Paul makes an appeal for widows not to remarry although it would not be a sin if they did get remarried to a biblically suitable mate.

Now why does Paul charge a Christian husband and wife, who are separated, to remain unmarried. He does so because it would be considered adultery to remarry when you don't have biblical grounds to divorce. And furthermore because another foundational characteristic of committed love is **reconciliation**.

This brings us to a second way committed love operates in a marriage.

## **2. Committed Love Reconciles**

Committed love, which God designed marriage to display for our good and His glory, not only **remains**, committed love **reconciles**. Between Paul's exhortation to Christian husbands and wives to remain unmarried if they separate, Paul writes parenthetically:

*“(but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband)”* (1 Corinthians 7:11).

As I noted earlier, sometimes serious conflicts occur in marriages and although they may not be grounds for divorce, they could necessitate a

separation. During a period of separation where there may or may not be grounds for divorce, Paul instructs the wife to remain unmarried, which also applies to the husband. The reason a married couple should remain unmarried even when there's a separation is because of a reverence for the covenant nature of God, but also because of the possibility of **reconciliation**. Reconciliation is the restoration of a broken relationship, which should be our first pursuit even when there's biblical grounds for divorce.

What stirs our hearts to pursue reconciliation? The more we consider and appreciate the committed love of God that reconciled sinners to Himself through Jesus, the more willing we become to do our part to be reconciled to others.

While explaining that we are new creations in Christ, Paul writes: *“All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”* (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

Every marriage will have conflict because every marriage is between two imperfect people committed to each other for a life time. But the fact that we are married to an imperfect person is a means God uses to make us more Christ-like. Moreover, the manner in which we work through conflicts with the grace, patience and forgiveness of Jesus, is also a sanctifying means that can impact the lives of others for Christ.

Reconciliation involves forgiveness, which we are more willing to give when we recall to mind that God for Christ's sake has forgiven us. But sometimes the willingness to forgive, especially when there's a breach of trust is suppressed because people wrongly assume that forgiveness and trust are the same thing. Concerning the difference between forgiveness and trust, Dave Willis explained, “It's vital that we understand their distinctions. Forgiveness can't be earned; it can only be given freely. That's why it's called grace. Trust, however, can't be given freely; it can only be earned. When someone breaks your trust, you

should give your forgiveness instantly, but give your trust slowly as it is earned through consistency of actions by whoever broke your trust. During this period of rebuilding, fight the urge to punish or retaliate. Those actions won't do anything to promote healing, and healing always needs to be our ultimate objective. Love, after all, is a healing force."

The process of reconciliation is not easy and it can take some time to rebuild trust. But when we consider the costly commitment of Christ, by which we have been reconciled to our eternal Father, we ought to be stirred to commit ourselves to the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to all the redeemed of the Lord. And this costly commitment that reconciliation requires and that the grace of God enables us to make has sanctifying power to heal broken marriages and save those impacted by it from eternal ruin.

This brings us to a final sanctifying characteristic of committed love.

### **3. Committed Love Redeems**

Committed love not only **remains** and **reconciles**, committed love **redeems**. Notice that the committed love that a Christian husband and wife are to give in their marriage extends to a home where a believer is married to an unbeliever. Paul continues:

*"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. <sup>13</sup> If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him" (1 Corinthians 7:12-13).*

Remember that the Apostle Paul is answering questions that believers in Corinth were asking concerning singleness and marriage. One of those questions had to do with what a Christian husband or wife should do if they were married to an unbeliever. Before he gives his instructions he prefaces it by saying, *"To the rest I say (I, not the Lord)."* This doesn't mean that Paul is just shooting from the hip and doesn't



have to be taken seriously. What Paul means is that he's addressing a question that Jesus did not speak to during his earthly ministry. In fact, at the end of the chapter Paul reminds his readers that he's speaking in the authority of the Holy Spirit.

Now with that in mind, Paul's instruction to a believer that's married to an unbeliever is that if the unbeliever is willing to stay in the marriage the believer in the marriage should not seek a divorce. And Paul gives the following redemptive reason and motivation: "*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*" (1 Corinthians 7:14).

What does Paul mean by the unbelieving spouse and their children being made holy through the believer in the marriage? It doesn't mean that the unbelieving wife and children are automatically saved because mom or dad is saved. In fact, Paul makes this clear in verse 16, which also sheds light on what Paul means by the family being made holy by the believer in the home: "*For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*" (1 Corinthians 7:16).

Extensive studies have shown the fallout that broken homes have upon children and society. However the blessings that can come to a home where a believer stays committed to his unbelieving spouse extend beyond societal benefits. Staying committed to an unbelieving spouse can reap eternal blessings upon the whole family.

The unbelieving spouse and children are made holy in that they have a greater opportunity to see the love of Christ demonstrated through the believer in the home more than those who must deal with the fallout of a broken family. The committed love of Christ displayed, especially in a difficult relationship, has sanctifying power to effect positive change in the lives of unbelieving spouses and children and can bring them to a saving knowledge of Jesus.

Some time ago I was counseling with a brother who had been struggling in his marriage to an unbelieving spouse. He shared with me that there had been times when he felt like giving up, but God showed him that his focus was in the wrong place. He shared that he was more focused on what his wife should be doing for him rather than on loving his wife in the power of the Spirit and not only for her sake but for the sake of his children who were watching. In fact, he shared the following words that stayed with me: “God showed me that my mission is to love my wife. And when there’s a conflict not to seek to win the argument, but to win her with love and grace to Christ.”

Committed love is costly love, but the cost has redemptive power to turn an unbelieving heart to Jesus. As Dave Willis noted: “The level at which you’ll make an eternal impact is defined by your level of commitment to the people God has placed in your life.”

Now Paul is not saying that an unbelieving spouse will always respond positively to the committed love of their Christian mate or that they should endure a truly abusive relationship. Because a committed Christian is not responsible for the actions of the unbelieving spouse, Paul continues: “*But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace*” (1 Corinthians 7:15).

Although Paul clearly understood the redemptive purpose of a believer’s faithfulness to the covenant of marriage and the sanctifying power of committed love, he also knew that in a sinful world, unbelieving spouses don’t always endure in the union. What should a Christian do when their unbelieving spouse abandons the marriage? As one commentator explained: “Rather than fight the breakup, Paul instructs the innocent, believing spouse to “let him leave” (7:15). In such cases, the Christian is the victim of a willful desertion and is, therefore, “not under bondage [or enslaved].” In other words, the child of God is no longer bound to that marriage relationship. That believer then falls into the category of the “unmarried” person (7:8)—free to marry a fellow believer “in the Lord” (7:39), but urged to remain single for the sake of an undistracted ministry.” Insights on 1 & 2 Corinthians, Charles R. Swindoll

## Conclusion

The kind of love that enables a marriage to not just survive, but to thrive is more than a feeling. “Love thrives where love is rooted in commitment, says Dave Willis. “Make sure your loved ones know your love isn’t just a fickle feeling; it’s a promise for your shared future” (Dave Willis).

Committed love rooted in the love of Christ does not look for loopholes or an escape. Committed love **remains**, especially when life and relationships get hard. Through the grace that God’s supplies as we devote ourselves to Him in prayer we can make a decision to love with actions even when the feelings are not there and when we do so consistently the feelings will follow.

Because marriage is between two imperfect people that will let each other down from time to time, love, rooted in Christ, is committed to the ministry of **reconciliation**, which involves forgiveness and doing the work necessary to rebuild trust.

Committed love that **remains**, and **reconciles**, especially when it’s costly, is a love that has power to **redeem**—its a love that sanctifies and brings God’s transforming presence into our homes and lives for the salvation of our families and all to the glory of Christ.

Remember that a healthy marriage is just two imperfect people who refuse to give up on each other because they know that our covenant keeping God will never give up on them.