

**06/15/25 Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage
1 Corinthians 7:8-16**

Welcome...

Last week Steven preached an excellent message from 1 Corinthians 7:1-7 where Paul begins to answer the Corinthian believers' questions regarding singleness, celibacy, and marriage. Today we will look at 7:8-16 where Paul will provide four case studies to help the Corinthians and help us to understand and apply biblical truths about marriage, divorce and remarriage.

Let's read 1 Corinthians 7:8-16...

You cannot understand the story of the Bible without understanding what the Bible says about marriage. The Bible starts with a marriage, and it ends with a marriage. It starts with the creation of man and woman, and the first wedding in Genesis 2. And the Bible ends with the great marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19.

Because God is the Creator of humankind and of marriage, His Word is the authoritative source for what we are to believe and how we are to live. As Ray Ortlund writes, "Marriage did not arise from historical forces. It came down by heavenly grace as a permanent good for mankind. It was God's to define."

The Bible defines marriage as a sacred, covenant relationship between a man and a woman, ordained by God, to be a lifelong, exclusive union. As we heard Pastor Steve read from Genesis chapter 2, marriage is a "one flesh" union, signifying a deep, lasting bond that reflects God's love and partnership. This union between husband and wife is not merely a legal or social contract, but a spiritual one, reflecting the relationship between Christ and the Church. Jesus said in Matthew 19:6, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."

There was a huge contrast between the seriousness of marriage for Jesus and for Paul, and the ease with which divorce and remarriage could occur in the Roman world. There was a saying in Corinth that women counted their age not by the number of children they had but by how many times they had been married.

Likewise, our culture has made a mess of marriage. The sanctity of marriage is rejected as the sexual privileges of marriage are taken without the commitment that the physical union is meant to represent. Our society has even sought to redefine God's institution of marriage by saying it no longer needs to be one man and one woman.

So, whether in Corinth or in our culture today, we need to see the challenges of marriage as opportunities to learn more about God, grow in our understanding of Him, and learn to love and trust Him more.

Main point: In 1 Corinthians 7:8-16, Paul gives four case studies so that we understand and follow God's perspective on marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Case 1: Previously Married Believers in verses 8-9

Case 2: Two Married Believers in verses 10-11

Case 3: Married to a Satisfied Unbeliever in verses 12-14

Case 4: Married to an Unbeliever Who Wants a Divorce in verses 15-16

Paul does not deal with every possible situation. He wisely provides four case studies and lays down spiritual principles, not a list of rules.

My prayer is that you will know God better, trust Him more fully, and love Him more deeply.

I. Case 1: Previously Married Believers

The Bible gives two clear grounds for divorce: (1) adultery in Matthew 5:32; 19:9 and (2) abandonment by an unbeliever found in verse 15 of our text today. Even in these two instances, though, divorce is not required or even encouraged.

Neither Jesus nor the apostle Paul taught that the offended believing spouse had to get a divorce. If the offender truly repents, confesses their sin, seeks to change for the glory of God and there can be forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration of the marriage. Those should always be the first steps that are pursued. Divorce is the final option, not the first option.

But there are other circumstances the believers may find themselves in and our passage brings up the first case in verses 8-9...

These verses answer the question, "Should those who were married and divorced before becoming Christians remarry?" No doubt that was a key question in the Corinthian church. Formerly married people came to salvation in Christ and asked if they now had the right to marry someone else. Paul's response here is uniquely fitted to those who want to know their options.

The "unmarried" and "widows" are the two categories of single people mentioned here, but there is a third category of single people ("virgins") indicated in verse 25. Understanding the distinctions in regard to these three groups is essential. "Virgins" refers to single people who have never been married. Widows are single people who formerly were married but were severed from that relationship by the death of the spouse. That leaves the matter of the unmarried. Who are they?

The term unmarried is used only four times in the New Testament, and all four are in this chapter.

Verse 8 speaks to "the unmarried and to widows" (not to "unmarried widows") so there are two groups of people. We can conclude that the "unmarried" here are not "widows." The clearest insight comes in the use of the term in verses 10 and 11: "the wife should not leave [divorce] her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried....)." So, the term unmarried indicates those who were previously married, but are not widows; people who are now single, but are not virgins; people who are divorced.

Paul is speaking to people who were divorced before coming to Christ. They wanted to know if they had the right to marry. Notice in verse 8 Paul counsel to them is that "it is good for them" who are now free of marriage to "remain even as I."

Some believe that the apostle Paul was married and perhaps widowed. The Sanhedrin was a Jewish council that served as a supreme legislative and judicial court in Jerusalem. History tells us that a member of the Sanhedrin was required to be married. However, Paul never stated that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. He definitely seemed to be on the path as Paul said in Galatians 1:14, "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers." However, Paul might not have advanced that far before he converted to Christ.

So, was the apostle Paul married? It is possible that he was at one time, but again, the Bible does not specifically say.

The point is that those who are single when converted to Christ should know that it is good for them to stay that way. There is no need to rush into marriage.

One author writes, “Many well-meaning Christians are not content to let people remain single. The urge to play cupid and matchmaker can be strong, but mature believers must resist it. Marriage is not necessary or superior to singleness.”

Staying single was not wrong, and getting married or staying married were not wrong. But in verse 26 Paul says “in view of the present distress” the Corinthian believers were experiencing, it seemed much better to stay as they were.

But notice verse 9...

If a Christian is single but does not have the gift of singleness and is being strongly tempted sexually, he or she should pursue marriage. “Let them marry” in the Greek is in the aorist imperative, indicating a strong command. “Get married,” Paul says, for it is better to marry than to burn. The term means “to be inflamed with passion.”

Now this is not to excuse a single person’s lack of self-control nor is it an encouragement to marry just any person of the opposite gender. It is never God’s will for Christians to marry unbelievers. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:14-15, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?”

Paul reiterates the same point in verse 39 when he says to widows, “A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.” The command is clear: if you are a believer and choose to marry someone who is not a believer, you are acting contrary to the Word of God.

Christians should only marry Christians. But they should not just marry the first believer who will say yes. Though you may want very much to be married, you should be careful. If you are single and want to be married, let me suggest four things that you should do.

First, don’t simply seek to be married, but pray and seek a person who knows Christ and want to make Him known. Someone you can love, trust, and respect.

Second, it is fine to be on the lookout for the “right person,” but the best way to find the right person is to become the right person. When I was single, one of my older sister’s would tell me, “If you are walking with Christ and it is God’s will for you to be married, He will send the right person at the right time—and never too late.”

Third, until the right person is found, your energy should be redirected in ways that will be the most helpful in keeping your mind off sexual temptation or discontentment. Two of the best ways are spiritual service and physical activity. Sign up for the workday this Saturday and you will get both – spiritual service and physical activity!

Fourth, until God gives you the right person, He will provide strength to resist temptation. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, “God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.” Trust and obey God.

Case 1: Previously Married Single Believers, next:

II. Case 2: Two Married Believers

Verses 10-11...

Lest there be any doubt as to the source of the teaching here, the apostle adds, “not I, but the Lord.”

Jesus said in Matthew 19:5-6, “For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh,” and then added, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate”

Jesus explained that God allowed Moses to permit divorce only because of His peoples’ “hardness of heart” (vv. 7–8), and that it was permissible only in the case of adultery (Matt. 5:31–32).

In our text Paul was not discussing divorce based on unrepentant adultery, for which Jesus specifically affirmed provision in Matthew 5:32; 19:8–9. He was talking about divorce for other reasons.

God declares in Malachi 2:16, “I hate divorce.” The context of Malachi the men of Judah appear to be divorcing their Israelite wives to marry younger pagan women. In so doing, they invite God’s wrath.

God hates divorce because it hurts the spouse who has sought to keep his or her side of the marriage covenant. The treachery described in Malachi 2:14–16 is both treachery against God and treachery against a faithful wife. God still hates the devastating effects of divorce on children. God’s design is that children be raised by a mother and father who are committed to each other in lifelong love. When professing Christians’ divorce for unbiblical reasons, they set a terrible example to their children by choosing to defy the plain teaching of Scripture and saying by implication that the gospel wasn’t enough to solve their family’s problems.

Children’s hearts are broken as they see their parents split up. They feel pressure to take sides when their parents are in conflict. Sometimes they wonder whether their parents’ breakup was somehow their fault.

In 1969 Governor Ronald Reagan signed California’s no-fault divorce law. The law was sold to him as a way to bring failed marriages to amicable ends. The California enactment started a trend that led to similar laws in all 50 states.

Over the next 20 years the divorce rate in our nation rose by 31%. Ronald Reagan said that signing the no-fault divorce law was one of the biggest regrets of his life.

Some of the believers in Corinth had already divorced each other or were in motion to that end. To those persons verse 11 says, “but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband.” If a Christian does divorce another Christian, except for unrepentant adultery, neither partner is free to marry another. They must stay single or rejoin their former spouse.

In God’s eyes, as long as that other partner is alive, that marriage union has never been broken. Paul makes it clear that these are not his suggestions, but the Lord’s commands.

Jesus said in Matthew 19:9, “Whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

This is how serious God views marriage and divorce.

III. Case 3: Married to a Satisfied Unbeliever

Verses 12-14...

The third case with which Paul deals is that of a mixed marriage. One of the partners is a believer and the other is not. The Bible warns against Christians marrying non-Christians.

However, there were those in Corinth who came to saving faith in Christ after they were already married to an unbeliever. Imagine a woman heard the apostle Paul share the message that Jesus died and rose again from the dead. She hears the gospel and believes its message. She comes home all excited and tells her husband of her new faith. He listens patiently and then replies that he isn't interested in fairytales.

What is to be her reaction? She is now joined in marriage to an unbeliever. Should she seek a divorce?

Notice verse 12...

Some commentators have tried to take Paul's word, "I say, not the Lord" to mean that Paul is now giving his own opinions instead of speaking to God's word. This is not the case. He makes the point that this is an addition to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5 and 19. Jesus did not deal with the situation of the believer who is married to an unbeliever. Paul has already cited the teachings of Jesus and now he says, "Here is something that Jesus didn't cover, so I am giving you some further instructions."

Verses 12-13...

To the man who has a wife who is an unbeliever and yet who desires to continue living with her husband, Paul's command is, "Do not seek to be divorced."

What is true for the Christian man is also true for the Christian woman. The principle is clear. The Christian is not to initiate a divorce.

What is the reason for this command? Verse 14, "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband."

Being a Christian who is married to an unbeliever is rough. But it need not make that Christian defiled. Quite to the contrary, the very opposite ought to be true. The unbelieving partner is sanctified by this union to a believer. Does this mean that you can be saved by being married to a Christian? No. But it does mean that the believer has a powerful influence on their spouse and children. This is not a new teaching. God has often blessed unbelievers because of their association with believers.

The case of Joseph in the land of Egypt illustrates this point. Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar. As a result of this union, we read in Genesis 39:5 that the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph.

The same thing is seen in the relationship of Jacob with his uncle Laban. After Jacob had worked for Laban for 14 years, Laban bore witness, saying in Genesis 30:25, "The Lord has blessed me on your account."

In Genesis 18:32 God offered to reprieve the destruction of the wicked city of Sodom if there were only ten righteous people in the city. The presence of ten of God's people within the city would have saved it from destruction.

Paul is not promising that the unbelieving spouse (we see that clearly in verse 16...) or even the children will be saved, but he is saying that the entire family is graced by a believer among them.

Often the testimony of the believing parent in this situation is especially effective, because the children see a clear contrast to the unbelieving parent's life, and that leads them to salvation.

That was the case in my wife's home. Paula's mother and father were in a difficult marriage and Paula heard them discuss divorce. But thankfully a friend encouraged Paula's mother to go get counsel from a pastor. When that pastor opened the Bible and shared the gospel with my mother-in-law, she believed. Jesus not only changed her heart and life, but my mother-in-law had a profound influence in the home and Paula's father and her siblings all eventually came to faith in Christ.

In Case 3 if an unbelieving spouse is willing to stay, the believer is not to seek a divorce.

IV. Case 4: Married to an Unbeliever Who Wants a Divorce

The fourth case with which Paul deals is also that of a mixed marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. This is the case in which the unbelieving partner initiates the divorce proceedings.

Verses 15-16...

The Greek word translated "leave" (*chōrizō*) refers to divorce. If the unbeliever begins divorce proceedings, the Christian partner is not to contest.

Verse 15 says "The brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases." In God's sight the bond between a husband and wife is dissolved only by death (Romans 7:2), adultery (Matthew 19:9), or an unbeliever's leaving.

When the bond is broken in any of those ways, a Christian is free to remarry. Throughout Scripture, whenever legitimate divorce occurs, remarriage is assumed. Where divorce is permitted, remarriage is permitted.

Divorce and remarriage is clearly forbidden in the case in verse 11, but here it is not forbidden.

God allows divorce and remarriage in such a case of desertion because He has called us to peace. A believing divorced person should be at peace in heart and soul if he or she did all that could be done to save the marriage. The spouse who was left does not share the guilt of the one who walked away.

When I was stationed in Florida with the Navy, I became friends with a man at church who came to saving faith after he was married. His wife did not like it and said, "I am not interested in Christianity! I did not sign up for this when I married you! I want a divorce." While my friend prayed that his wife would believe in Christ, He also knew that only God could change her heart.

Verse 16....

If the unbelieving spouse abandons the marriage, thus forcing divorce on the believer, then the Christian is free from obligation to his or her former spouse and free to remarry.

Some closing thoughts:

Even though all divorces are the result of sin, not all divorces are sinful. Divorce is permitted in the Bible as a concession to human sinfulness and to protect the innocent party. The Bible provides two specific grounds for divorce: 1) unrepentant adultery and 2) abandonment by an unbelieving spouse.

But what about those sinfully divorced (meaning your divorce is not on the basis of unrepentant adultery or abandonment by an unbeliever). If that is you, and your former spouse is still unmarried, you may have the opportunity to be reconciled to your former spouse.

Those who have sinfully remarried should repent before God of their past sin and seek forgiveness from the ones who were hurt by their sin.

But if you or your former spouse has remarried then you should not try to break apart their new marriage and attempt to restore your old relationship. Two wrongs don't make a right. Rather, you should seek to honor God by being faithful in your new marriage and honoring your former spouse's new marriage.

If you are presently in a difficult marriage, I strongly advise that you seek godly counsel your church pastors and elders. Proverbs 12:15, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel." Be careful who you go to for counsel. Sometimes your family and friends just want you to be happy and provide unwise counsel.

Hebrews 13:17 tells us that your church leaders have been appointed by God to shepherd your soul, and you are accountable to them. The elders can help you to evaluate the situation biblically and to avoid making impulsive decisions, which could make things worse.

But you will probably have to humble yourself to be open to their advice, which may go against some of your own thoughts and feelings. Our involvement can also protect your future reputation because we will be able to bear witness that you sought to do God's will and listened to wise counsel as you worked through a difficult marriage.

We are prone to think that a change in circumstances is always the answer to a problem – especially in marriage. But the problem is usually within us and not around us.

The heart of every problem is the problem in the heart. That is why you need to be in a living relationship with God through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. Whether delightful or difficult, your marriage can become a doorway to a closer walk with God, to be a light in this world, so others will see the love of Christ.

Let's pray...