

## PAUL'S TEACHING ON MARRIAGE, DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

As Jesus' emissary Paul's teaching on divorce in no way conflicts with the position taken by Jesus. However, because Christianity had spread out into the Gentile world, Paul had to write concerning rather different circumstances than those that Jesus had dealt with. Nevertheless, his basis for what he wrote is exactly the same as that which Jesus accepted and taught on this subject.

### PAUL TEACHES THE SAME OBLIGATIONS FOR A HUSBAND AS IN EXODUS 21:10, 11

Paul's main comments on divorce identify the grounds for divorce by emphasizing the obligations within marriage. Most of what he has to say on this subject is found in 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5.

#### *MATERIAL AND EMOTIONAL OBLIGATIONS IN A CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE*

- ❖ "Husbands, love your wives as the Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her...In the same way husbands should **love their wives** as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hated his own flesh, but **nourishes** it and **cherishes** it...let each one of you love his wife as he does himself and let the wife see that she respects her husband"  
(*Eph. 5:25-33 ESV*).

As noted in STUDY 19, Exodus 21:10, 11 became the standard in the marriage contract of the obligations/stipulations that the husband was to provide for his wife namely: **food, clothing** and her **marriage rights** (*love and sexual intimacy*). Although the Hillelites and Shammaites argued over the length of time before material/emotional neglect would become the basis for a divorce, they never disputed **the fact** of these failures as being the basis for divorce. So Paul sets out these obligations showing that:

- ❖ "...the married man is anxious about **the worldly things**, how to please his wife...the married woman is anxious about the worldly things how to please her husband." (*1 Cor. 7:33-35 ESV*).

Here, Paul highlights the material obligations — **the worldly things** — in a Christian marriage. So the persistent failure to keep the marriage vows regarding *the things of the world* would eventually form the basis for divorce.

Furthermore Paul also deals with the other major aspect of good marriage i.e. the marital rights/sexual intimacy when he responds to the Corinthians letter:

- ❖ "Now concerning the issues about which you wrote: *"It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."* <sup>2</sup>But because there is so much sexual immorality, each man should have relations with his own wife and each woman her own husband. <sup>3</sup>The husband should give to his wife **her sexual rights**, and likewise the wife to her husband; <sup>4</sup>because the wife doesn't have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband doesn't have authority over his own body, but the wife does. <sup>5</sup>**Don't deprive each other**, except by mutual agreement for a specified time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then get back together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. <sup>6</sup>But I say this as a concession, not as a command. <sup>7</sup>I wish that everyone was as I myself am —\*. But each has his own gift from God, one this gift, another that gift. <sup>8</sup>To **the unmarried** and **the widows** I say that it's good for them to remain as I am. <sup>9</sup>But if they don't have self-control, they should marry, because it's better to marry than to burn with sexual desire" (*1 Cor. 7: 1-9 RRV*).

Paul's statement that "the husband should give to his wife **her sexual rights**" is based exactly on the law of Exodus 21:10 concerning the rights of a slave wife. So a free wife would logically have the

equivalent rights according to rabbinic analysis. Clearly Paul was basing his teachings concerning Christian sexual morals on the Mosaic Law as Christ had done.

#### *WORSE THAN AN UNBELIEVER*

❖ “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his own household, he has denied the faith and is **worse than an unbeliever.**” (1Tim. 5:8).

With the earlier clarification as to how Jesus likely viewed divorce, one can understand that a **believing husband** who deserted his wife would certainly fall into the category of being “worse than an unbeliever” because, by his desertion, he no longer provides for his family.

### IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD “SEPARATION” AND “DISMISSAL” BOTH REFER TO DIVORCE

Paul’s main discussion of divorce is found in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 where he uses the Greek words *chorizo* = to separate, and *aphiemi* = to dismiss. In contradistinction to the Jewish usage of the term for “dismiss” as an uncompleted divorce (because no certificate of divorce had yet been handed to the dismissed wife and which would be an unjust dismissal if one is never given to her), the Greco-Roman separation or dismissal was a legal divorce. It was not merely that of a married couple living apart as in modern Western terms of separation. There were more than 50 words for divorce in Greek marriage and divorce contracts. Whoever owned the home “dismissed” the other party, and whoever did not own the home “separated themselves” from the other party. Usually Paul spoke of “*separation*” as the wife’s action and ‘*dismissal*’ as that of the husband unless the wife owned the home. Not only did Paul not allow this Greco-Roman ‘separation/dismissal’ as a scripturally valid divorce for Christians, but he actually condemned it. This ***divorce by separation/dismissal*** was more or less the equivalent of the ***any cause*** divorce of the Jewish Hillelites. So if Paul was referring just to separation in Western terms, then the woman would not be called “**unmarried**” (vs. 11). So this term does mean that she is now divorced.

Nevertheless, just as with Jesus, Paul recognized the many difficulties that can occur between two badly matched people where one or the other of the marriage partners can make marriage intolerable for the other partner.

### THREE SITUATIONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN REGARDING DIVORCE

In 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 Paul discusses three different situations concerning divorce:

- Divorce of two believers (vss. 10-11).
- Divorce of a believer and an unbeliever where the unbeliever doesn’t want to divorce (vss. 12-14).
- Divorce of a believer and an unbeliever where the unbeliever does want to divorce (vss. 15-16).

However, we should not, as some have done, make any artificial distinction in Paul’s rules to the three groups. What is said by Paul is fully the inspired word of God, even though verses 10 and 11 are statements direct from “the lord.”

#### ***I. TO BELIEVERS - 7:10-11***

❖ “To the married I give this instruction (not I, but the Lord): a wife shouldn’t separate herself (*Gk chorizo*) from her husband; <sup>11</sup>(but **if she does**, she should either ***remain unmarried*** or ***be reconciled*** to her husband), and the husband shouldn’t dismiss (*Gk aphiemi*) his wife” (RRV).

*In this passage, the couple is distinct from those who are married to unbelievers as mentioned in verses 12-16 and so here they must represent two believers.* Also here Paul commands the believer not to use the Greco-Roman ‘separation’ type of divorce (similar to the Hillelite “for any cause” divorce) but to remain married. However, Paul does recognize that even a believer may have to divorce their believing partner under Greco-Roman law if the 4 scripturally valid grounds apply to her situation, when he says:

“*if she does [separate herself from her husband].*” So the phrase “*she should...be reconciled to her husband,*” applies to a quite different law (the Greco-Roman) to that which would happen under the stricter Jewish Shammaite law. Under that law the wife would be completely divorced from her husband (*not Hillelite type divorce*) so that she could not be reconciled to him. Furthermore, she would want to remarry someone else as quickly as possible because her financial situation would otherwise become dire. Yet, under Greco-Roman law it was very different, so that under that law, although divorced, she could still be reconciled.

When Paul says “she should...*remain unmarried*” this was to be temporary because of the current circumstances (verses 25-28) and put forward by Paul as a reason to deter all who might want to marry at that time. These circumstances concerned “**the present crisis**” noted in verse 26 and 28 which created much greater problems for those who were married. Furthermore, Paul shows that for the unmarried more time and energy could be devoted to Christian activities (vss. 32-35).

Clearly, what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 is not to be taken as meaning that Paul was teaching that all remarriage was wrong; but rather that it was inadvisable for the above two reasons. Also Christian marriage of itself is no more sacred than a marriage of a believer to an unbeliever and so Paul’s words do not exclude Christian couples from the possibility of divorce.

## 2. WHERE THE UNBELIEVER DOES NOT WANT TO DIVORCE - 7:12-14

❖ “Concerning other issues I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and **she is willing to live with him**, he shouldn’t dismiss her. <sup>13</sup>And if a woman has a husband who is an unbeliever and he is willing to live with her, **she shouldn’t dismiss him**, <sup>14</sup>because the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of the brother...” (RRV).

In this case the believer should not seek a divorce, because the sanctifying Christian influence of the believing partner upon the unbelieving partner and their children should be maintained. This can work toward them becoming Christians in time. Clearly Paul wants all marriage to work and so strongly encourages the wife to try to make it work.

However, the phrases “**he/she shouldn’t dismiss him/her**” does not mean that divorce should never take place because these phrases are qualified in the next passage where Paul allows for the divorce if the unbeliever wishes it. Furthermore, Paul would have had in mind the background of the statements in Exodus 21:10-11 and Jesus’ evident acceptance of them so that no wife would be obliged to stay married to a man who failed in his material or emotional obligations. Especially would this be the case if she was being physically or emotionally abused.

## 3. WHERE THE UNBELIEVER DOES WANT TO DIVORCE - 7:15-16

❖ “But **if the unbelieving partner separates himself or herself let it take place**. In such cases the brother or sister is **no longer bound to the partner**. God has called you to peace. <sup>16</sup>So, wife, how do you know whether you just might save your husband? Or, husband, how do you know whether you just might save your wife?” (RRV).

This situation is where the unbelieving partner has already separated from the believer; so that the phrase “let it take place” is simply a direction for the believer to accept this situation and to let it take its course toward the complete end of the marriage.

He or she is then free from all marital obligations because he/she is “**no longer bound to the partner**.” This phrase does not mean being ‘free to separate but not to remarry’ as some propose, but rather that he/she now has the right to remarry. This is because the unbelieving partner has already separated himself or herself – it is a final and unconditional divorce with no statement to either to remain unmarried or to be reconciled as is the case with two believers in #1. Further confirmation of this is found in Paul’s use of the term “bound” in verse 39 so that a husband’s death releases a wife from the marriage bond leaving her free to remarry because:

- ❖ “A wife is **bound** to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, **she is free to be married** to whom she wishes, only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39).

In both instances, the marriage has ended because of the permanent departure of the unbelieving partner. It really doesn't matter whether it was by death or by divorce – the result is the same – the marriage ends.

Some have proposed that, although a believing wife or husband “is **no longer bound to the partner**” who is an unbeliever so that they are now divorced and fully free to remarry, this did not apply to two believers in group #1 as mentioned in verses 10-11. However, Paul's later statement in verses 27, 28 shows this to be incorrect, because that statement concerns both group #1 and group #3 i.e. all those who “**have been released from a wife**” i.e. divorced. Also because a Christian couple marries “in the Lord” they have accepted all the responsibilities that go with such a marriage, and to live up to the vows set out in the Scriptures. If one partner persistently breaks these why should the innocent partner be penalized by not being allowed to divorce and to later remarry? Such an arrangement would be unjust.

Paul's statement of “*God has called you to peace*” is reminiscent of the pre-A.D. 70 rabbinic phrase “*for the sake of peace*” and was used to indicate that a **pragmatic solution** to something had been sought rather than following a strict law. Strictly speaking, dismissed/separated believers were not free to remarry under the laws of Scripture, but only if their divorce was based on one of the four grounds for divorce. So it seems that Paul cut through any legalism and presented a pragmatic solution for believers who had been divorced against their will. Certainly the fault lies with the person who was the cause of the divorce by their failure to keep their marriage vows.

## THOSE WHO ARE DIVORCED CAN REMARRY

*TO THE UNMARRIED AND THE DIVORCED - 7:25-28*

<sup>25</sup> Now concerning those who have never married, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my opinion as one shown mercy by the Lord to be trustworthy. <sup>26</sup> I think that ***in view of the present crisis*** it is good for a person to ***remain as he is***. <sup>27</sup> If you **have been bound to a wife** stop seeking to be released. If you **have been released from a wife**, stop seeking a wife. <sup>28</sup> **But if you marry, you haven't sinned.** And if a virgin marries, she hasn't sinned. Yet those who marry **will face a difficult time**, and I am trying to spare you that” (RRV).

The phrase “But if you marry” in verse 28a refers directly to those who have been “released from a wife” i.e. divorced. They therefore, might wish to **remarry**. Paul separates these ones from the “virgins” i.e. those who have never married and shows that in neither case would marriage be a sin for them.

So, if the unbeliever divorced the believer (*by separation/dismissal in the Greco-Roman style*) it would constitute a valid divorce for the believer – he/she “**is not bound**” (NAB) according to verse 15 or “*no longer bound to that person*” (CEV) meaning that he/she was free to remarry.

*MISUNDERSTANDING OF VERSE 27*

However, some have misinterpreted certain translations of verse 27 to mean that the person “*free from a wife*” (ESV) was never married. But here the contrast is between the married state i.e.: “Are you bound to a wife?” (*dedesai gunaiki*) and the divorced state: “Are you **free from a wife**?” (*lelusai apo gunaikos*). Grammatically and in context the phrase “*free from a wife*” does not mean that a man was never married, but rather that he is now divorced from a wife as shown word for word: “If you **have been freed** from a wife” (UBS Interlinear) or “Are you released from a wife?” (NASB) or “Has your marriage been dissolved?” (NEB, REB, and Barclay). The NIV translation: “Are you unmarried?” does not fit the Greek grammar as shown by many scholars. Verse 34 contrasts “the woman who is unmarried, and the virgin” showing that “unmarried” here means ‘no longer married,’ but not because of being widowed (verse 9) – a separate category.

## PAUL'S DISCOURAGING OF MARRIAGE DID NOT MEAN REMARRIAGE WAS WRONG

However, Paul's motive for *discouraging marriage or remarriage in Corinth* as stated in verses 26 and 28 was: "*in view of the **present crisis***" and "*those who marry **will face a difficult time, and I am trying to spare you that.***" This crisis and the personally difficult times were probably caused by the famines that were being experienced in Corinth at the time and which made it very difficult for a man to provide for his wife. Also for a Christian man, there was the ever-present threat of imprisonment or even execution and so leaving his family destitute. For these reasons it was not a good time to be married. So Paul is not saying that marriage is incompatible with Christian service in general, but rather he was sparing those in Corinth from a worse situation of even greater difficulties at that particular time by encouraging them to remain unmarried if they were able to.

Although in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul is advising against remarriage in the current circumstances he clearly shows that it is not wrong to remarry because of his statement in verses 27b and 28: "*If you have been released from a wife [i.e. divorced]...<sup>28</sup>**if you marry, you haven't sinned.***"

## DOES ROMANS 7:1-4 TEACH THAT THERE CAN NEVER BE REMARRIAGE UNTIL THE HUSBAND DIES?

- ❖ "Now, dear brothers and sisters—you who are familiar with the law—don't you know that the law applies only while a person is living? For example, when a woman marries, the law **binds her** to her husband as long as he is alive. But if he dies, the laws of marriage no longer apply to her. So while her husband is alive, she would be **committing adultery if she married another man**. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law and does not commit adultery when she remarries. So, my dear brothers and sisters, this is the point: You **died** to the power of the law when you died with Christ. And now you are **united with the one who was raised** from the dead. As a result, we can produce a harvest of good deeds for God" (NLT).

The subject in this passage is that of Christians who are no longer under the Law because they are now united with Christ. The subject here is being illustrated and no **illustration of itself** can be taken as a proof text. Writers rarely draw upon all of the detailed complexities of the subject that they choose to use as an illustration; and this is also the case with Paul as the commentators show. In this case, Paul is using, as an illustration, the subject of a Jewish marriage that runs its full course and ends with the death of the husband. So this is an illustration of a **normal successful marriage** and is **not about divorce** because under Jewish law a woman had no right to directly divorce her husband, but had to request it from a court. Yet in verse 3 Paul posits a situation, as part of the illustration, where a woman "would be **committing adultery if she married another man**"... "while her husband is alive" i.e. the man is still her husband.

So although this shows Paul's view of normal marriage as a lifetime union; nevertheless he is not here teaching that a wife cannot, under any circumstances, remarry after divorce until the man who was her husband dies. He certainly is not saying that *only* death dissolves the marriage bond. He simply is not drawing upon all the many factors that can be involved in marriage such as divorce.

## FORBIDDING REMARRIAGE

If anyone forbids remarriage for an individual whose marriage has truly scripturally ended then such a forbiddener puts themselves in a similar position to those who are condemned by Paul's words concerning those "*in later times ... who forbid marriage*" (1 Tim. 4:1-3). Here there is no exception clause, such as, "except those who are divorced." So the forbidding of remarriage, under normal circumstances, should never be forbidden. Furthermore, neither valid divorce nor remarriage are **included in any list of sins that will keep a Christian out of the Kingdom** (1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:19-21).

## REMARRIAGE AFTER WIDOWHOOD

- ❖ “A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, *she is free to be married to whom she wishes*, only in the Lord.” (1 Cor. 7:39 ESV).

Because this is addressed to widows it does not concern the four Jewish scriptural grounds for divorce. It is speaking of the situation of a marriage that runs right through to the death of the husband and that neither of them has had any significant problems that precipitated a divorce, or that any such difficulties were resolved. Therefore, one cannot say that the only time a woman may remarry is if her husband dies. To do so would contradict what Paul has just said in verses 27 and 28 of 1 Corinthians 7.

### THE TWO SCRIPTURALLY VALID GROUNDS FOR REMARRIAGE

- A. Having a scripturally valid divorce (*as above*).
- B. The death of one’s spouse (1 Cor. 7:39).

However, one significant difficulty arises when a known adulterer/adulteress and his/her lover, who would have contributed to the break-up of the original marriage, seek remarriage. For a minister to perform a marriage ceremony for them would really be a condoning of their sin. So the minister might choose the non-biblical but practical position taken in both ancient and modern times of refusing to perform a marriage ceremony for them.

### CONCLUSION FOR STUDIES 19, 20, AND 21

If divorce was wrong it would be listed along with the many other sins, but it never is (1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:19-22). Yet Roman Catholicism allows for no divorce because it treats marriage as a sacrament which therefore, cannot be changed. Instead, it operates a system of annulment which is based on the view that the marriage was never valid. This is certainly unsatisfactory to many separating Catholics because it means that any children of the marriage would be wrongly viewed as illegitimate so that their names would be besmirched. However, neither Jesus nor Paul ever presented an annulment situation or required those in second marriages to separate or to get a divorce.

Anglicanism allows divorce for adultery and for desertion, yet remarriage after the desertion is not allowed. Many other churches, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, allow divorce only for adultery after which remarriage may take place.

All these positions are based on a reading of the texts without an understanding of the essential 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish background which was only just beginning to be known in the mid-1800s and not fully comprehended until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These positions taken by the denominations above regarding divorce and remarriage have led to situations, for some wives, which are absolutely intolerable. Yet is it really likely that Jesus, as a reflection of our loving Heavenly Father, would make rules requiring a wife to stay married to a man who is physically abusing her (*perhaps beating her or sexually abusing her*) or emotionally abusing her by constant criticism or belittling comments and insults or by being domineering? This does not fit Paul’s description of how a wife should be highly valued, loved and cherished. Additionally, based on the definition of adultery, any sexual abuse of the children by the father are valid grounds for divorce. So would Jesus really have made a rule that meant that a marriage must continue in spite of the fact that the husband consistently fails to provide the necessities of life for his family? Such a person is worse than an unbeliever.

Furthermore, the above faulty positions regarding divorce and remarriage have led to situations, for some husbands, which also are absolutely intolerable; whereby a wife has persistently misused or failed to use what the husband has provided for the family or has persistently denied her husband dignified marital intimacy or has behaved indecently with other men. Yet, in context, the understanding of Jesus’ words shows that he never created the basis for the occurrence of any such appalling situations.

Jesus' great accomplishments in this area were that he removed the inequalities for women by speaking out against polygamy so that a wife could get a divorce for her unrepentant husband's sexual immorality. He also showed that the "any cause" divorce, which was very popular because the men could get a divorce on a whim, in fact led to adulterous situations. This may all have seemed new to the disciples but Jesus was simply directing the people to return to God's original standard as laid out in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Furthermore, Paul, in dealing with the situation for Christians in the Gentile world, did not contradict Jesus' position on these matters.

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SUGGESTED READING

*Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* by David Instone-Brewer

