

## PREFACE

Within the context of Chapter Seven, it is perhaps nowhere more important to understand God's "why" than in His commands about divorce. And if you will pardon me the cheap promotion, I am reminded of the topic of this month's *Reflections by the Pond*, which is all about whether or not we, as individuals who call ourselves "Christians," are willing to follow the one source we have for knowing the mind of God the Father and His Son. In this month's issue I cite a number of public figures, "religious" leaders who claim to be Christians, yet deny the truth of God's word. One of these individuals, an ordained minister, on virtually every major topic of Scripture—the virgin birth, the crucifixion, the resurrection, heaven and hell, homosexuality, the omnipotence and omniscience of God—on all of these she holds a position in *opposition* to Scripture. Yet she calls herself a "Christian" minister.

And here, as we approach vv10-11 and following in Chapter Seven, we must ask ourselves: Are we willing and sufficiently courageous to set aside all the societal pressures, the coercion to be on the "correct" side of the cultural war, our personal experiences and emotional preferences—are we willing to set all that aside and follow what God is telling us in His word? Are we willing to accept and obey *God's* "why" over the "why" of this fallen world?

## Read 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

## v10

*But to the married I give instructions...*

In Corinth, not only was it convenient and simple for a man to divorce his wife—he could just walk out the door—but, in contrast to Judaism, it was also permitted for the wife to divorce her husband. Once again the Corinth of the first century was very much like our society today. John MacArthur makes the point that since Paul never gave instructions to unbelievers, "the married" refers to marriage between two believers.

**give instructions**<sup>nasb</sup>, **command**<sup>hiv, kjvs</sup>, **give this charge**<sup>esv</sup> = *parangelo* = from <G3844> (para) and the base of <G32> (aggelos); to transmit a message, i.e. (by implication) to enjoin :- (give in) charge, (give) command (-ment), declare; to order. [Compare this to "wish" in 7:7—thelo \(an inclination\).](#)

So here we have a new tone from the apostle; he is not just "saying" or "wishing," but commanding. And, as M. R. Vincent puts it, "Paul means that his readers had no need to apply to him for instruction in the matter of divorce, since they had the words of Christ himself."

*not I, but the Lord,*

Let me throw in a reminder here of what I said about this in our first study on this chapter:

Some have interpreted v10 to mean “not I, but the Lord [is telling me]...” and v12 to mean something like, “since I haven’t heard anything from the Lord, I’ll offer a best guess.” But that is not how these are to be read.

The contrast is not between authoritative revelation and guess, but explicit command stated by Jesus and authoritative apostolic command or counsel. This situation is similar to the erroneous position taken by some sects that the only authoritative text in the Bible are those words printed in red—which is nonsense. The Bible is God’s word from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. In these passages Paul, in answering the questions sent to him by the church in Corinth, is referencing either something Jesus had earlier stated (“not I, but the Lord”), or his authority as someone called by Jesus Christ not just as an apostle, but to render trustworthy judgment (v25: “as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy”).

When he states that this is from the Lord, Paul is probably citing what Jesus said in Matthew 19, but before we look at that, let’s stop by the prophet Malachi to read what God the Father, *Yahweh* in His own words, has to say about this. The passage in Malachi 2 includes a lot of textual challenges, so there can be many differences between the translations. Let’s read it from the NIV to get the sense of it. (You may want to just listen.)

Another thing you do: You flood the LORD’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands.  
You ask, “Why?” It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.  
Has not [the LORD] made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.  
“I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel, “and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith. (Malachi 2:13-16)

This is not metaphorical; *Yahweh* is indeed speaking of human divorce. But the passage is in the context of Judah being unfaithful to *Him*, and *Yahweh* cites married partners breaking faith with each other as an *example* of how they are breaking faith with Him. He hates both! Now let’s see what Jesus had to say about this.

**Read Matthew 19:3-6.**

Marriage between man and woman is an act of God in which the two become one (Genesis 2:24). It is God's doing. Thus, as D. A. Carson puts it, "Divorce is not just 'unnatural' but rebellion against God. God and man are so far apart on this issue that what God unites, man divides."

The Pharisees pressed the point with another question. Paraphrasing v7, they asked Jesus, *If what you say is true, "let no man separate what God has joined together," then why did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?* Jesus never let the religious leaders get away with their semantical tricks; He points out that Moses did *not* command, but "permitted."

### **Read Matthew 19:8-9.**

In agreement with the prophet Malachi, Jesus points out that divorce was never part of God's righteous, perfect plan for man. Let's return to Carson's comments on this passage in Matthew.

*D. A. Carson:* Jesus taught that Moses' concession reflected not the true creation ordinance but the hardness of men's hearts. Divorce is not part of the Creator's perfect design. If Moses permitted it, he did so because sin can be so vile that divorce is to be preferred to continued "indecency." This is not to say that the person who, according to what Moses said, divorced his spouse was actually committing sin in so doing; *but that divorce could even be considered, testified that there had already been sin in the marriage.* Therefore any view of divorce and remarriage (taught in either Testament) that sees the problem only in terms of what may or may not be done has already overlooked a basic fact—divorce is never to be thought of as a God-ordained, morally neutral option, but as evidence of sin, of hardness of heart. (emphasis added)

Earlier, in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus raises this same subject, adding a little more information. In the previous passage with the Pharisees Jesus declared that when a man divorces his wife and remarries, *he* commits adultery. In His treatise on the mount, Jesus expands this and makes an important point for our consideration.

### **Read Matthew 5:31-32.**

The additional information is found in the middle of v32:

*everyone who divorces his wife...makes her commit adultery* (emphasis added)

How can this be?

Let's return to our passage in First Corinthians.

*(but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.*

The apostle Paul is straddling two cultures here. He is issuing a command to Corinthian women not to divorce their husbands—a prospect unthinkable under Jewish law; the wife could never do this. So the Corinthian culture, which did permit women to divorce, is being addressed here. Yet his command to “remain unmarried” rises out of Jewish law—not the Corinthian culture. David Garland offers a fascinating insight.

*Garland:* It may seem that Paul presents the Christian wife with two options: either remain unmarried or be reconciled to her believing husband. *But he directs her to remain unmarried in order to be reconciled with her husband.* In Paul’s Jewish tradition, a wife who has been divorced and has married another is forbidden to her former husband. (emphasis added)

Let’s interrupt Garland for a moment and take a look at the passage he cites for this—one which gives an illustration of a divorced woman who remarries, then, for whatever reason, wished to return to her former husband.

### Read Deuteronomy 24:4

Now let’s return to Garland.

If there was to be a reconciliation, she must remain unmarried. The assumption behind this instruction is the same as in the teaching of the Lord: the marriage bonds remain intact regardless of what steps spouses might take to end the marriage.

When Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount that “everyone who divorces his wife...makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery,” He was citing the Mosaic Law, but by bringing it forward into *His* law, He made it relevant for Christians today.

It would be easy, as I am sure many Christians do, to consider this as just one of those archaic OT laws applicable only to Jews under the Mosaic system—hence not applicable to Christians. The first nagging problem with this rationale is that both Jesus and the apostle Paul cite these passages from the Law in their teaching.

But even that is beside the point. The important take-away from all these passages from God’s word is that marriage between man and woman—the only marriage that *is* a marriage—is something far more serious to the God who has joined them, than it often is to the ones who have been joined. That is, the Lord God places far more importance on that idea of “one flesh” than people today.

Divorce does violence to that. These were not just clever words Jesus employed to win an argument and make the Pharisees look bad; He really meant it when He said, “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. *What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.*” (Matthew 19:6; emphasis added)

People today—even some within the church—think of marriage as two people who come together for a while, and maybe a ways down the road they part, go their separate ways, and come together with someone else. That is not how God sees it. God sees that marriage union as a whole, a singular unity. So when divorce occurs, in His eyes it is not two people going their separate ways, but something that was whole being ripped violently apart, torn in two. In God’s economy those two halves still belong to each other. So if one one of them remarries, adultery has already occurred; the marriage union has been defiled.

Paul’s command in v11 for the wife (or husband) to remain unmarried is not a restrictive penalty, but a grace. If both spouses remain unmarried there is still hope for reconciliation.

## CONCLUSION

The reasons for divorce in Corinth that Paul is dealing with were the opposite of what most are today. More often than not, in our society, the desire for divorce is founded on sexual license, whereas in Corinth it was founded on the misguided “spirituality” of the time, that is was more spiritual to be unmarried and celibate. This is probably why the command in vv10-11 is directed toward women first: most commentators are of the opinion that this situation was centered around the so-called “eschatological women,” who considered celibacy to be a higher spiritual plain. They had probably tried celibacy within their marriage, but, finding that unworkable, now wanted to divorce their husbands. Paul is saying believers are not to divorce, but if they do, they are to remain unmarried, so as to leave open the preferred reconciliation with their spouse.

God’s “why”? We have already stated it; just as God looks down on a believer and instead of a sinner sees the atoning blood of His Son, He looks down on believers’ marriage and sees not two, but one. Divorce does violence to that beautiful, God-ordained unity.

Nevertheless, as Fee points out, “Paul does not raise this norm to law. Divorce may happen, and such a person is not [to be] ostracized from the community.” The ultimate point of this is less a granting or withholding permission to divorce, but, for every Christian marriage, *will we be obedient to the Lord who joined us as one?*