

PREFACE

In our passage today Paul continues answering the questions put to him in the recent letter from the Corinthian church. And here we cannot accuse the Corinthians, as we could earlier in this chapter, of holding to a skewed perception of spiritual reality. Here they seek Paul's counsel for a very real and not unexpected situation—not just in the Corinth of the first century, but in our world today. That is, *What to do when a believer is married to an unbeliever?*

Read 1 Corinthians 7:12-14.

vv12-13

But to the rest...

In vv8-9 Paul addresses widows and widowers; in vv10-11 he addresses married believers—that is, marriages in which both spouses are followers of Christ Jesus. Now, in vv12-16 Paul addresses “mixed” marriages, meaning marriages in which one spouse is a believer and one is not—either a pagan or a Jew. Once again his counsel is what it has been all along: So long as it depends on you, remain as you are. But along the way he speaks to some specifics.

I say, not the Lord,

In vv10-11 Paul was handing down counsel about which Jesus had spoken specifically, but now, in vv12-16, since Jesus did *not* address these specifics, Paul speaks from apostolic authority on the topic.

that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her.

This is not a suggestion, but a command (“must not”); the KJVs soften it a bit with “let him not,” and the ESV softens it further with “should not..” The command is that the believing (Christian) spouse is to never be the one to initiate divorce.

We know that this is addressed to mixed marriages—note, “brother” (*adelphos*)—but we also know that it is addressed to marriages in which one partner has become a believer *after* the wedding. Remember that the apostle was in Corinth for over a year and a half, and he would never have countenanced a marriage between a believer and nonbeliever.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-15.

But we can easily imagine a number of instances in which just one in an existing marriage is converted, but not the other. We can also easily imagine the friction this might cause in the household. These are the situations being answered here.

We can also imagine that anyone in the church who was willing to forego a physical relationship within a *believing* marriage, or even separate from each other, because they considered themselves to be in a spiritual state above such things, would readily assume that they should divorce a partner who was not a believer. They would take the position that somehow the unbeliever defiled the believer—especially the former Jews in the congregation. Beyond any Jewish influence, these individuals could have been basing their position on what Paul had written in an earlier (now lost) letter—something they had misunderstood.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-11.

Even after his clarification in *this* letter they may have (mistakenly) taken the counsel to mean that they should no longer associate with an unbelieving spouse. But, again, that was not what he was saying; his original counsel was not to associate with someone who, though claiming to be a Christian, remained fundamentally immoral and an idolater—to wit, a liar and hypocrite. The unbelieving but honest spouse actually fits the description of those with whom they *should* associate—and pretty much for the same reasons.

We need to define a few terms used in vv12-13 before we go much further.

consents^{nasb,esv}, **willing to**^{niv, nkjv}, **pleased to**^{kjv} = *syneudokeo* = from <G4862> (sun) and <G2106> (eudokeo); to think well of in common, i.e. assent to, **feel gratified with** :- allow, assent, **be pleased, have pleasure.**

We are not to think this refers to a grudging, conditional relenting; it is not just willingness, but includes a measure of approval, and it also assumes there is not coercion from the believing spouse. In other words, it is the unbelieving spouse saying, “I *want* to stay.” Notice that the “mutual agreement” of v5 is still being applied in this situation.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:5.

live with = living together in a marital, conjugal commitment.

divorce, send...away, put...away, leave = *aphiemi* = from <G575> (apo) and hiemi (to send; an intensive form of eimi, to go); to send forth, in various applications (as follow) :- cry, forgive, forsake, lay aside, leave, let (alone, be, go, have), omit, put (send) away, remit, suffer, yield up; divorce.

[Verse12b and v13b both this word.](#)

And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away.

The idea that some today can still claim that the apostle Paul was a woman-hater, teaching that the man should enjoy unfettered dominance with his foot on his wife's neck, reveals only their ignorance of Scripture. Not only do we see mutual agreement in the word translated "consents," but notice the perfect symmetry and balance between v12 & v13: The only difference between the two in the Greek is that in v12 he refers to the man as "brother" (*adelphos*)—probably to emphasize his believing status as a brother in Christ—but in v13 he uses "woman" (*gyne*) rather than the equivalent "sister." Other than that small difference, there is perfect balance between the sexes of believers in a mixed marriage.

The command is the same for both: *If you are a follower of Christ, married to an unbeliever, you must not be the one to initiate divorce.*

v14

In v14 Paul supplies the "why" behind his command—one that points back to God, the one, of course, from whom the command comes.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:14.

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband;

This is pretty straightforward—except we need to know how to understand his use of the word "sanctified" (ESV: made holy). The root word of this verb is

hagiozo = from <G40> (hagios); to make holy, i.e. (ceremony) purify or consecrate; (mentally) to venerate :- hallow, be holy, sanctify.

That's the encyclopedic definition, but it doesn't help us very much. We can affirm, at least, what Paul is *not* saying, that the unbelieving spouse is "saved" by the believing spouse. Verse 16 makes clear that the unbelieving spouse still needs to be saved.

For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

Now, v16 requires its own clarification ([which we will address in our next session](#)), but for the moment it makes clear that the unbelieving spouse is not *automatically* saved by virtue of his or her relationship with a believing spouse. And, of course, if it did, that would fly in the face of everything the NT teaches about how to come to Christ. So what *is* he saying in v14?

There is, of course, the obvious explanation that if the unbelieving spouse remains in the household and proximity of the believer, it increases the odds that they would, as it were, see the light and be converted, influenced by the life of their sanctified spouse. But v14 is saying more than that; there is a middle ground, a spiritual reality for this situation that lies somewhere between just one spouse witnessing to the other, and one spouse literally *being* the salvation of the other. Paul will later, in his letter to the Romans, speak of this with rich imagery.

Read Romans 11:16.

Here Paul speaks of the special “holiness” enjoyed by Israel. Gordon Fee explains:

Israel is not yet converted, but because the “firstfruits” and “root” were “holy,” that is, because Israel was originally thus “sanctified” [i.e., set apart] unto God, the Israel of Paul’s day, though still in unbelief, was nonetheless “holy” in this special sense. Precisely because they belonged to God in this special sense, Paul hoped for their eventually coming to faith. That seems to be the same analogy put forth here [in 1 Corinthians 7:14].

John MacArthur brings out another aspect of this—that of “common grace.”

MacArthur: In God’s eyes a home is set apart for Himself when the husband, wife, or, by implication, any other family member, is a Christian. Such a home is not Christian in the full sense, but it is immeasurably superior to one that is totally unbelieving. Even if the Christian is ridiculed and persecuted, unbelievers in the family are blessed because of that believer. *One Christian in a home graces the entire home.* God’s indwelling that believer and all the blessings and graces that flow into the believer’s life from heaven will spill over to enrich all who are near. (emphasis added)

Finally, David Garland cites a quote of profound imagery from R. B. Hays, regarding a marriage and home in which only one is a believer:

...this should be hallowed as “a sphere in which God’s holiness and transforming power operate.”

for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

Let me illustrate this—as well as the end of v14—from my own childhood, an experience many of you could attest to as well. I was born into a family as the second son (and last child) of two Christian parents. As a child in a “Christian home” I was not just *influenced* by the faith of my parents, in the sense that I picked up information from them, from Sunday School and church, from their behavior, but more than that, in our home I was *enveloped in the sphere of “God’s holiness and transforming power”* that resided in that home because of their faith. In that family and home the “natural” state was one of being enveloped by the grace of God. It was natural not just to go to church on Sundays, but to talk about God, to think about God, to read about God, to thank Him for what happened in our lives. Being raised in that environment, it was thus “natural” for me, at the tender age of seven, to walk the aisle of our Baptist church and ask Jesus to come into my heart.

I was not saved by the faith of my parents, but by being raised in that sphere of holiness charged by the transforming power of God, it was a natural, perhaps predictable, consequence that I *would* be saved.

Here is the graphic yet mystical “why” God wants believers to remain married to their unbelieving wives or husbands. It is an example of His grace—both common and saving grace.