

## PREFACE

The verse and passage before us now has, through the centuries, suffered from more varied interpretations and, yes, misinterpretations than perhaps any in God's word. (In fact, in the Catholic church its misinterpretation is canon law.) If I had been warned about Chapter Seven as a whole—and I was—verse fifteen was the bright, red-hot beacon of that warning. Never have I read so many different opinions from scholars, so many nuances of interpretation, for any one verse.

Exacerbating the situation, on top of the scholarly exegesis of the literal text are the many layers of societal rationale; that is, we like to think, *if, in our society, it has been all right to do things this way for so long, then that must be what the Bible text means*. However, the only society that should be considered when trying to understand what Paul is saying to the Corinthians is... the Corinthian society. The truths contained herein are certainly *applicable* to us; they have been put down in God's word for our enlightenment and instruction. But the context for our understanding is the Corinthian community and church. Our consideration should be, What were *they* doing that caused Paul to give the instruction he did? What was the situation there? We should *never* interpret the counsel of God's word by the standard of today's culture, but always *apply* the counsel of God's word *to* today's culture for correction.

Here is just one example: It is safe to say that in today's society, more often than not an individual's motivation for divorce is unhappiness with one's partner; fornication, infidelity, adultery (i.e., lust); financial problems; or "I just don't love him any more." But these were not the situations to which Paul was responding in his letter to the Corinthian church. Their reasoning, while still wrong, was based for the most part on a misguided interpretation of the "spiritual" life. They thought it was more "spiritual" to be single and/or celibate—even if they were presently married.

So we must continually—not just in this passage, but in the entirety of God's word—guard against interpreting it by our contemporary standards and lifestyles. In that habit lies error—and madness.

In our last session we looked at Paul's command to believers who found themselves in a mixed marriage—i.e., married to an unbeliever—in vv12-14. Verse fourteen was particularly eloquent in stating the *reason* for the believing partner to remain in the marriage: "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy." I cited R. B. Hays, who described this "sanctification" as "a sphere in which God's holiness and transforming power operate."

Now, in vv15-16, Paul by the power of the Holy Spirit answers the question, *But what if my unbelieving spouse does not consent to live with me? What if he insists on divorce?*

### Read 1 Corinthians 7:15-16.

#### v15

Under God, the believer in a troubled, mixed marriage has no recourse but to obey his or her Lord, and thus no power or rights to affect change. That is, under God the believer cannot—*must* not—initiate divorce from an unbeliever, nor can he prevent the unbeliever from leaving.

*Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave;*

The apostle has put forth an excellent argument for “remaining as you are” in v14—so long as the unbeliever chooses to stay. This has been his consistent picture of the ideal: wherever, whatever you are when God called you, stay there. Do not change your (in this context) marital status just because you are now a Christian. Now, of course, he is not saying that when you come to Christ as a little boy at the age of seven you are to remain for the rest of your life a young boy in your parents house. In the Corinth church individuals were running riot over their distorted conception of “spirituality,” They were saying,

- it is good for a man not to touch a woman (v1);
- it is good to abstain from physical relations in a marriage (vv3-5)—but then it is also OK to visit prostitutes (6:15-20);
- it is OK for two believers to divorce for supposed “spiritual” reasons, but then later marry someone else; and
- it is certainly OK for a spiritually minded believer to divorce an unbelieving spouse.

To all of these Paul’s answer was, *It is best to remain as you are*. Do not change your life situation just because you are now a Christian (and he will illustrate this further in the interlude of vv17-24). A Christian should never marry a non-Christian, but it may be—and quite often is—that only one in a marriage between two non-Christians will be converted. Paul’s answer to this is the same: *Remain as you are*. If the unbeliever is pleased to stay, remain married. And if v15 stopped with the first sentence or clause, we could all go home now, since it is succinct and unambiguously stated: If the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave. You have held up your end of the covenant, but they have decided to leave. Then let them.

But v15 does *not* end there. Using language that is ambiguous and perplexing, Paul extends the thought.

*the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases,*

The immediate challenge before us is to understand what Paul is saying by his use of this word translated “under bondage” in the NASB.

**under bondage**<sup>nasb, kjvs</sup>, **bound**<sup>niv</sup>, **enslaved**<sup>esv</sup> = *douloo* = from <G1401> (doulos); **to enslave** (literal or figurative) :- bring into (be under) bondage, × given, become (make) servant.

To say that opinions vary on this and the next clause would be a gross understatement. To say that the contemporary applications of this passage have given rise to marital permissiveness would be an even more profound understatement. But let us bravely and unabashedly examine it on the basis of the actual text, in the context of the Corinthian church. There we should discover the truth—and, by extension, the true application for us today.

**Sidebar:** “the brother or the sister”

For some peculiar reason the original NIV translates this “a believing man or woman.” The updated NIV corrects this to match not only the rest of our popular translations, but also the literal Greek: the brother (*adelphos*) or the sister (*adelphē*). Earlier, in v13, he chose to use “woman” (*gyne*) instead of “sister”; it is reassuring to see him use this balanced, even affectionate term here for a fellow believer who is female.

But let’s return to this business of bondage. *Douloo* is not Paul’s customary term for the binding character of marriage. We find an example of that near the end of this chapter (as well as v27).

### **Read 1 Corinthians 7:39.**

Here the word is the Greek *deo*, which has more of a legal connotation—bound by law and/or duty—whereas *douloo* (v15) speaks more to, as reflected in the ESV, enslavement. This leads us to the conclusion that in v15 Paul is *not* saying that if the unbeliever leaves the marriage it means that the believer may now consider the binding nature of the marriage covenant null and void. Under God, only the death of one of the partners does this. But also under God there are two exceptions (concessions) permitted, as Jesus put it, “because of your hardness of heart”: adultery and an unbeliever initiating divorce. When the circumstances of these two situations occur, the believer is no longer enslaved to a relationship that someone else has dissolved.

Paul employs slave-language from his Jewish background to emphasize how serious this is and that the marriage bond is to be respected and not treated lightly.

We additionally have the Corinthian context. Under *Jewish* law, a divorce was invalid without the husband's consent; the wife had no say. But under the Roman law in Corinth, "marriage was a matter of intention, if you lived together 'as' man and wife, man and wife you were" (Crook). The converse was also true. Divorce was instantaneously effective whenever one party renounced the marriage (Dixon).

Thus in a culture in which "divorce" could be implemented so easily and cheaply (no lawyers to pay), Paul—who had just stated that those who are married are to remain married—does not want to see believers marooned in a state of limbo because of the action of an unbeliever. In this event, believers would be enslaved to a marriage that no longer existed! So in this event of the unbeliever initiating divorce by leaving, the believer is to consider himself "not under bondage" to that relationship. With this clause, Paul is essentially just restating the first part of the verse.

I admit this is a slippery concept; it is difficult to grasp the difference between what Paul is not saying, and what he is saying. Here is how Gordon Fee states it: "...[Paul] does *not* intend to say one is not 'bound to the marriage.' One is simply not under bondage to maintain the marriage, which the other person wishes to dissolve. From Paul's point of view, one is bound to a marriage until death breaks the bond." [There is a critical takeaway from this that I will address before we are done.](#)

*but God has called us to peace.*

Now we take a look at the second perplexing portion of this verse. Again, interpretations are myriad, with one of the most common being the one held by John MacArthur, that by forcing the unbeliever to stay when they wish only to leave, the believer is denied the peace to which God has called him or her. This interpretation flows effortlessly into a "pessimistic" interpretation of v16 ([more on this in a moment](#)). Neither of these are preferred.

Once again we must consider the situation in first century Corinth. Today, in most jurisdictions in the western world, one partner in a marriage has the right to contest a divorce, even take the dispute to court. As stated earlier, this was not the case in a Roman city of the first century. Even Paul's command to "let him leave" when the unbelieving partner wants to depart the marriage, is academic: the unbeliever is going to go no matter what the believer says or does. (Knowing this, Paul may have meant not so much *give him permission to go*, but *accept the fact that he has ended the marriage*.) So this plays into what Paul is saying regarding "peace."

## w15c-16

*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?*

The preferred interpretation of the end of v15 is aided by associating it with v16 rather than the first two parts of v15. (Remember, the versification of our Bible is not inspired.) Paul's overarching principle in Chapter Seven is that followers of Christ remain as they are—i.e., remain where and as God has called them (vv17-24).

He opens the interlude that follows with the same thought.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 7:17.**

The point being that he has not veered off-course. That is still Paul's emphasis. So what do we mean when we apply the terms "pessimistic" or "optimistic" to v16? Remember, Paul is writing to people who *want* to end their marriage, not who are desperate to save it—if in fact they even could. He is offering reasons to *stay* married.

David Garland points out that the idiom that begins v16—"how do you know?"—can be used in a context of optimism, as well as pessimism. That is, it could be read with implied pessimism, as it reads in most of our translations, implying a negative result. But it is used elsewhere optimistically, such as by King David when he was praying for Bathsheba's child.

### **Read 2 Samuel 12:22.**

Interpreting v16 optimistically—for example, by inserting just two words: "For how do you know, O wife, whether **or not** you will save your husband?" (or even just the one word "not")—colors how we interpret the end of v15. If Paul has been pressing individuals to remain married because of the residual sanctification which comes from having just one Christian in the family, why would he then turn and say, in v16, *But hey, odds are against you saving him anyway?*

Then the "peace" spoken of in v15 is not the peace we deserve by ridding ourselves of an unbelieving spouse, but the attitude and life we are "called to" live peaceably with someone who just might come to Christ through our desire to emulate our Master, the "Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

It may help to read two paraphrases of these two verses that (mostly) follow this line.

*The Message paraphrase* (by Eugene Peterson): On the other hand, if the unbelieving spouse walks out, you've got to let him or her go. You don't have to hold on desperately. God has called us to make the best of it, as peacefully as we can. You never know, wife: The way you handle this might bring your husband not only back to you but to God. You never know, husband: The way you handle this might bring your wife not only back to you but to God.

*J. B. Phillips paraphrase*: But if the unbelieving partner decides to separate, then let there be a separation. The Christian partner need not consider himself bound in such cases. Yet God has called us to live in peace, and after all how can you, who are a wife, know whether you will be able to save your husband or not? And the same applies to you who are a husband.

## CONCLUSION

I want to conclude this with two points: first, on remarriage, and second, on God's redeeming grace.

- First, throughout the history of the church this passage has been used to permit divorce and remarriage; as I pointed out earlier, in the Catholic church it is canon law. While it is true that this passage does indeed permit divorce from an unbeliever—but *only when the unbeliever insists on leaving*—it says nothing about remarriage. Paul simply does not bring it up at all. The issue of remarriage, as Gordon Fee writes, “must be wrestled with in the much larger context of Scripture.” It may be that some who are divorced and have remarried to believers have solid scriptural basis for this path, but this passage alone cannot be determinative for that.
- Second, if you or a Christian you know has *not* followed a scripturally sound path regarding divorce and remarriage, Fee leaves us with something important we should never forget:

In many cases such marriages are clearly redemptive. Even if it is not the ideal situation, God still redeems our fallenness, whether it be individuals or broken marriages.

There is not one believer in this class who has always been faithful to God's ideal path of righteousness. Not a one. Yet, praise God, the blood of Christ covers it all.