



# Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1315-3  
1 Corinthians 7:10-24  
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August 12, 2007

## Fidelity

SERIES: *Sex, Marriage & Singleness from God's Point of View*

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In 25 years of pastoral ministry I figure that I've done close to 200 weddings. I always spend several hours with these couple trying to prepare them not so much for a great wedding but for a great marriage. During that time, I've yet to meet a couple who actually planned NOT to stay together. I suppose some fear the possibility of that happening, but no one really thinks it will happen. Yet we've all heard the depressing statistics. Currently, about 40-50 percent of marriages end in divorce.

There are many reasons couples get divorced. Research done on the causes of divorce reveals that a lack of communication is one of the leading causes. You can't have an effective relationship if either one of you won't discuss your feelings, talk about your issues, and expect your partner to guess what the whole problem is about.

Those who come from divorced homes are more likely to divorce than people who come from happily married households. People who get married between the ages of 23-27 are more likely to stay together than people who get married in their teens. People who live together before marriage have higher rates of divorce than those who don't.

In many cases, quite a few of the problems that cause divorce have existed in the couple's relationship long before they got married. Money problems, infidelity, sexual issues, addictions, and physical or emotional abuse usually pop up before the wedding. The problems were either not acknowledged or were ignored in the fond hope that marriage itself might offer a miraculous solution.

And believe it or not, the statistics for divorce aren't much different for those who claim to be followers of Christ. Of course, the church ought to be a safe place of healing and forgiveness for those who have been through the pain of a divorce, but it should also be a place where marriage commitments are nurtured and honored.

The apostle Paul addressed these issues with the believers in Corinth because divorce was an issue in the church back then as well. There were married believers who for one reason or another didn't want to stay married. Some of them had already separated from their spouse. There were others in the church who were married to unbelievers and they wondered if they should stay with them. Then there were singles who had already been divorced or widowed and questioned if it was better for

them to get married again or stay single. So Paul wrote to them about these things and his words are as relevant today as they were then.

Paul makes two statements...

### 1. Believers that are married should stay married (vv.10-11).

The first thing he says is that believers who are married should honor their marriage vows and stay married. Look at vv.10-11. **"But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (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."**

Notice that Paul says this came from the Lord, not himself. And we know that Jesus talked very specifically about this on several occasions. Go back with me to Matthew 19:3-9.

**"Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?' And He answered and said, 'Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, "FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH"? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.' They said to Him, 'Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY?' He said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.'"**

There is a lot we could say about this passage, but we can only highlight the main points. Notice that Jesus goes all the way back to Genesis and the creation of the institution of marriage. He says, "Let's get beyond what's lawful; let's talk about God's purpose." He goes back to creation and shows that divorce is inconsistent with God's original blueprint. He quotes from Gen. 1:27 and says **"God made them male and female."** God made two distinct genders of humanity, male and female, for the

purpose of bringing them together in marriage. He also tells us how God joins us: **“For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh...”** In a mysterious way, God glues together two people. There is a spiritual, physical and emotional aspect to this. Spiritually, something happens in those vows. A transaction is made in heaven and two become one. Physically, we become one flesh as we enjoy the beauty of our sexual union. Emotionally, we become one in a process of living together, working together, struggling together and praying together. It's a oneness that is shaped as we stay committed to each other through all the experiences of life.

Then Jesus issues a warning: **“What God has joined together, let no man separate.”** You can't take something God has glued together and separate it with a piece of paper. If it were a man-made thing, maybe you could, but it's not. This is why divorce brings such deep pain and suffering, because you're undoing something God has glued together. Someone has said, “If it's true that in marriage one plus one equals equals one, then how can you divide the number one without making fractions?” That's the deception of divorce. To think we can divide that one flesh and be left with two whole individuals. A divorce is like an amputation: You survive, but there's less of you.

Notice also that Jesus prohibits divorce remarriage with one exception, and that's in the case of what he calls here “immorality.” The Greek word for “immorality” is porneia, from which we get our word pornography. It's a word that refers to every kind of illicit sexual relationships. Jesus is saying that any variety of sexual infidelity that involves one with another person constitutes a violation of the marriage covenant that is so deep divorce is allowed. It shows us how serious sexual sin really is. There is nothing that touches at such a deep level as sex. The world wants us to think it's just biology; just a physical act. But it's so much more than that; it involves us at a deep level of soul and spirit. That's why Jesus sees it as the consummate act of betrayal which can justifiably end a marriage.

Nevertheless, infidelity doesn't require divorce it just permits it. Jesus wasn't teaching that the innocent party must or even should divorce an unfaithful partner. We have to remember what Jesus teaches about forgiveness elsewhere. When there is genuine repentance and change in an unfaithful partner there can be forgiveness and healing. I know many couples who have found healing in their marriage on the other side of adultery. They have good marriages. They have a scar and walk with a limp. They wish it never happened. But God can heal.

Notice also what Jesus says about remarriage. If you divorce for any other reason than a spouse's infidelity and then remarry, you're committing adultery. This brings us back to 1 Corinthians. In v.11 Paul says **“but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband.”** Paul is talking about cases where adultery wasn't an issue. He recognizes that sometimes two believers do separate or get divorced on illegitimate grounds. I assume that there were people like that in the Corinthian church, which tells me that people like that CAN and SHOULD be part of the church. They shouldn't be excluded; they shouldn't be condemned. Life is full of “but ifs.” The church is full of “but ifs.” Christians that don't allow for “but ifs” live in a dream world and try to purge the church of all imperfections. But Paul didn't live in a dream world; he lived in places like Corinth and the Bay Area where “but ifs” happen all the time. Paul simply says that if this “but if” happens then these two believers should remain single or else be reconciled. If that sounds pretty strict, remember it's based on what Jesus said about marriage as a permanent one flesh union. This is why some of us think if two believers CAN'T live together it's better to obtain a legal separation than divorce. Legal separation prevents remarriage and leaves room for reconciliation.

So the first thing he says about marriage is believers that are married should stay married.

## **2. Those that are married to an unbeliever should stay married if they can (vv.12-16).**

But then he goes on and he deals with a different group of people in the church. He speaks to believers who are married to unbelievers. Paul would never encourage a believer to marry an unbeliever, but often times a husband or wife would come to Christ after they had already been married. Some began to wonder if perhaps they should leave the unbeliever since Christ calls us to put away our old way of life. Perhaps they thought that they should leave for the sake of the children. What if my unbelieving wife or husband influenced my children to turn away from Christ? Shouldn't I leave? Paul says, “No! Those who are married to unbelievers should stay married if they can.” Look at vv.12-13. **“But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away.”**

When Paul says that this is him speaking and not the Lord he doesn't mean that his words don't carry the same weight. He simply means that he's now going to address a situation on which the Lord didn't speak. Paul still speaks with full apostolic authority! He says that if an unbelieving spouse wants to stay in the marriage the believer must not divorce them. Spiritual incompatibility is NOT proper grounds for divorce. It certainly can make for a difficult marriage. If you're in that situation, you may feel like half of a person because you can't share the most meaningful part of your life with the one you love. Sometimes it's hard to come to church because

you see couples where both share a love for Christ; it's hard because you so long for that, and you see how they take it for granted, and even complain about their marriages! Churches need to pray for, encourage and love folks married to unbelievers.

Paul goes on and states why they're not to leave: **"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"** (v.14). This doesn't mean that the unbelieving husband and children are automatically saved because of you. The word "sanctify" means to set apart. Paul means that your spouse and your children are set apart in the sense that they are now under the influence of the Gospel. We might think the believer will be corrupted by the unbeliever, but Paul says it's the other way around; they'll be influenced by you. That's not a guarantee that your spouse or your children will come to Christ, but it's certainly an encouragement that they may. If you're in that situation, this should free you to love your unbelieving spouse with all your heart and be the best wife or husband you can be, and it should give you hope. Your children are set apart by your faith, and so is your husband or wife. You're not defiled by them; they're sanctified by you.

But what happens if your unbelieving spouse warms out of the marriage? Paul addresses that in vv.15-16. **"Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. 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?"** Paul envisions a situation where the unbeliever has chosen to leave; the initiative isn't with the believer. The idea is that if the unbeliever deserts and is determined not to return, then let them go. When Paul says you're not "under bondage" he means that the bond of marriage has been broken and you're free to remarry. The reasons we should let them go are that we're called to peace and we can't guarantee we'll win our unbelieving spouse by trying to perpetuate a union they've decided to end. That's what he means when he says, "How do you know whether you will save your wife or husband?"

Let me summarize what we've learned. Believers that are married should stay married. God's intention in creation was to bring male and female together in an exclusive, permanent, one flesh union. Only in the case of adultery are they permitted to divorce. If one of them leaves for any other reason, they shouldn't be remarried. Second, those that are married to an unbeliever should stay married if their unbelieving spouse consents. But if a believer's unbelieving spouse wants to leave they should let them leave and they're free to remarry. So there are only two reasons where divorce is permissible: adultery and abandonment.

### 3. Three pastoral issues that Paul doesn't address.

There are three situations that Jesus or Paul didn't address. *First of all, what about abuse?* I have no hesitation saying that if a wife is being physically abused she should get out of that situation. My opinion is that this is a deep violation of a person that, unless there is repentance and proven change, at the very least separation is the right course of action. A case could even be made that physical abuse constitutes abandonment or immorality. I'm not talking here about emotional or verbal abuse. As bad as that is, emotional abuse has become a catch all that permits divorce for almost any reason at all. In extreme cases, this may be cause for separation. But we have to be careful not to make exceptions into excuses for divorce. An angry word has been taken as emotional abuse. A lustful eye has been taken as infidelity. The whole tenor of what Jesus and Paul say is that if you're looking for a loophole to get out of a marriage, your heart is in the wrong place.

*The second situation has to do with a person who has been divorced and remarried against God's will.* Should they leave the later marriage since it was considered adultery? No. Even though the second marriage shouldn't have been done, it shouldn't now be undone by man. Real vows have been made and a real sexual union has taken place. It's a real marriage. And that real covenant of marriage can be a place where the grace of God is experienced. In other words, a couple who repents and seeks God's forgiveness shouldn't think of that marriage as ongoing adultery, even though that's how the relationship might have started.

*Third, what about those who were divorced for the wrong reasons before they were a believer? Can they never remarry?* Consider Paul's words in 2 Cor. 5:17, **"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."** Because of this, I can't see how a pre conversion divorce should be reckoned against the new believer as sin. This doesn't mean that no attempt at reconciliation should be made if that option is open and if the Lord leads in that direction. But, where reconciliation is impossible, a new life should allow a believer to remarry in the Lord.

### CONCLUSION

I want to finish by speaking to a few different groups of people. *First, I want to address those who are single but contemplating marriage.* I don't know how else to put it, but it's very important you know what you are getting into. Marriage is God's gift, but don't enter it casually. This is why we take premarital counseling so seriously. This is why we won't just marry anybody. This

is why we will not marry a believer and an unbeliever. So, before you take the step, seek the Lord in prayer, seek counsel from wise people, and give yourself plenty of time to prepare. Some of you are single and want to be married, but the Lord hasn't provided the right one yet. As painful as it is to wait, hold out for God's best. Let God forge you and shape you into a person who will be a great husband or wife.

*Second, I want to speak to those who have been broken by divorce in one form or another.* I want you to know that God loves to come along side of you in your pain and bring comfort. God hates divorce but he doesn't hate divorcees. You may have been abandoned, but God will never abandon his children. His healing and his grace is available. He will even give you the power to forgive that person that has hurt you. Maybe you're the one that needs forgiveness. If you come to the Lord with a broken and repentant heart he won't turn you away. Divorce or adultery is not the unforgivable sin. The fact is you can't out sin God's grace. Jesus comes to you as he did the woman caught in adultery, "Look around, does no one condemn you? She replied, "No one, Lord." Jesus then said, neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and sin no more."

*Finally, I want to speak to those who are struggling in marriage.* Maybe you're thinking about calling it quits. Jesus talked about "hardness of heart." Maybe you can feel your heart begin to harden towards your spouse. If you're in that situation you may have a tough time hearing this, because as the heart hardens the ears grow deaf, and it becomes hard to hear the voice of God. But, if that's you, I want you to know that in almost every situation I can think of, it's worth hanging in there. God really does hate divorce. He hates it not because he's a hateful God, but because he loves you and he knows you. He knows that decision will create wreckage beyond imagination in your life and in those you love. Divorce, as a cure, is far worse than the disease. The best reason to stay married is because Jesus tells you to. And do you know what? There is something worse than being in a bad marriage. Do you know what that is? It's displeasing the Lord. So don't buy into the lie that says the most important thing is for you to be happy. God has much more important things in store for you than that.

And do you know what else? You can be in bad marriage and still have tremendous joy and freedom in your life. Listen to what Paul says to slaves just a few verses down in vv. 21-22. **"Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is**

**Christ's slave."** How could he tell slaves not to worry about being slaves? Because our freedom in Christ is more important than being humanly free. He assumes that we can be content people in an unhappy marriage. Why is that? Because while the gospel doesn't always transform our surroundings, it does always transforms us. So you can be locked up in a prison and still singing praise to God, like Paul and Silas were in Philippi. And you can be bound up in a tough marriage yet still experience the joy of the Lord.

Now you can stay in a marriage and still be hardened against your wife or husband. So, besides just staying in the marriage, let God soften your heart. Confess your bitterness and resentment and unwillingness to forgive. Accept the fact that marriage is hard work. Look in the mirror and focus more on changing yourself than changing your spouse. Be the first to say you're sorry. God loved you when your back was turned to him, now you turn and do the same for your spouse. If you need to, get help. Call one of our pastors. Seek out a Christian counselor, but don't give up. And perhaps most importantly, pray. Pray that God would change you. Pray that God would restore your love for one another. Pray that your marriage could reflect Christ's relationship with the church.

A couple came to a pastor and said, "We're getting divorce, but we want to come to make sure that you're okay with it." There are people who come to a pastor hoping that he'll sanction a split. Instead, the pastor said to the husband, "The Bible says you're to love your wife as Jesus Christ loved the church." The husband said, "Oh, I can't do that." The pastor said, "If you can't begin at that level, then begin on a lower level. You're supposed to love your neighbor as you love yourself. Can you at least love her as you would love a neighbor?" The husband said, "No. That's still too high a level." The pastor says, "The Bible says, Love your enemies. Can you start there?"

Some of you do have to start there. But wherever you have to start, understand that God will use and bless your obedience. It starts with you, not with your spouse. It starts with you being God's person in that situation. A character in the Anne Tyler novel *A Patchwork Planet* comes to realize this too late. He's gone through a divorce and now works at an occupation that has him relating almost exclusively with elderly people. As he observes their long-standing marriages, he comes to a profound understanding: "I was beginning to suspect that it made no difference whether they'd married the right person. Finally, you're just with who you're with. You've signed on with her, put in half a century with her, grown to know her as well as you know yourself or even better, and she's *become* the right person. Or the only person, might be more to the point. I wish someone had told me that earlier. I'd have hung on then; I swear I would."

My prayer is that you will hang as well.

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