

Well, today's topic is one of those that we don't often talk about in church – not because we don't need to – it's just easier **not** to. And that's one of the big benefits of studying a whole book of the Bible. If it were left up to me, I probably wouldn't have chosen this topic today. Some of it, I'm a little embarrassed to talk about; And some of it, I'm pretty sure people will take offence at... But the Lord has put it in His word, and so it's the topic for today (and next week).

When it comes to Marriage and sex, there's 2 very different ways, that people get it wrong. Last week, we talked about sexual immorality, where people engage in sex, with somebody they're not married to. And to sum it up – **Flee** from sexual immorality. Run away from it. Don't do it... It's bad for us, and it's not at all compatible with our calling as disciples of Jesus....

This week, we see the opposite extreme. The **other** way that some people can get it wrong, (not many, but some), is to deny that marriage, and even physical / sexual intimacy within marriage, is a **gift** of God, that husbands and wives should cherish and cultivate.

“Asceticism” (Have you ever heard that word before? – what's an ascetic – not anaesthetic (we're not putting you to sleep) – an Ascetic... Asceticism, is not so common in our culture today, but in the past it **has** been common (in **all** different religions). Asceticism, is a severe form of 'self-denial'. It's where someone gives up stuff that's 'pleasurable' to them, in the hope that, somehow by giving up the pleasures of life, they will get themselves closer to God.

Alright, so an ascetic might

- only wear rough old sackcloth
- only eat dry bread and water
- They might have a policy of “No sex”
- No television
- No alcohol
- No music
- No dancing
- No car

They believe, that if they give up all of these things, they’ll be much more spiritual; and their prayer life will be so much more powerful...

OK, that’s what an Ascetic believes.

And it seems that in the church in Corinth, they had the 2 extremes (right there). They had those who pursued every possible pleasure (even sexual immorality), and that’s what we covered last week. And it **also** seems that there were those who were teaching ‘asceticism’ – That they should **give up** every pleasure, and deny themselves happiness in this life, in the hope that it would make them more spiritual...

We’re into a new section of the letter today, where Paul answers a whole bunch of questions that somebody in the church, has written to ask him about, and they’re very relevant topics for us today. Who’d have thought, the questions that they were asking a couple of thousand years ago, are still the questions we want answered today? And it’s all about how we should conduct ourselves, as disciples of Jesus – especially in the areas of marriage and sexuality.

It seems there must have been some ascetics there (alright), because first-up, Paul finds he needs to actually assure them that hey, it **is** a good thing, for a married couple to share physical intimacy together....

V17, which we're not actually studying today (that comes next week), but it summarises what the main message of **all of chapter 7** is about (alright, so here's the summary): ¹⁷ **Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.**

Alright, so the main message for today, is to lead the life that the Lord has assigned for **you**, and to which God has called **you**.

Now, let's unpack that:

What Paul is saying, and what this whole section is about, is God calls some to singleness. And for these people, singleness is a gift – it is a calling of God. And God calls others to marriage. And for them, **marriage** is a gift – **marriage** is a calling of God.

If the Lord has called you to singleness, He's also called you to chastity (that means to refrain from sex). But if the Lord has called you to marriage, then that's an entirely different calling.

There is nothing dirty about physical intimacy between a husband and a wife. If the husband withholds physical intimacy from his wife, or if a wife withholds it from her husband, that doesn't honour God – that's selfishness... And it puts a strain on the marriage, that shouldn't be there. And I know this is no excuse, but Paul is very practical and truthful, when he says that if a husband or a wife denies their spouse the physical intimacy that should be regularly expressed within their marriage, that increases temptation, for them to look for it elsewhere... It's no excuse, but it **is** true.

You see, husbands and wives **need** each other. We might need each other in different ways, but we need each other. And it is the husband's duty, to be the husband that the wife is needing him to be, and it is the wife's duty, to be the wife that the husband is needing **her** to be. The husband belongs to the wife. The wife belongs to the husband.

Marriage isn't about **me** having **my** needs met – It's about meeting the needs of my wife, and vice versa.

And so Paul says: “Don't deprive one another”. The only reason that physical intimacy should be suspended with a marriage, is if it's taking up too much time, and you find you don't have enough time for prayer. And so it should only be suspended for a short time, provided the two of you agree. ... But when you've finished your praying, make sure you come back together again, **so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.**

So, is “the lack of self-control”, the **only** reason husbands and wives should nurture physical intimacy within their marriage?

Of course not... Physical intimacy between a husband and a wife, is **very much** a part of what it means to be married... It's an expression of the love we have for each other, as we put the other one first...

And maybe we husbands and wives need to be reminded of these verses more often... Some of you will go "Amen, brother." And others might go "Oh, really???"

Let's move on.

Paul now addresses 3 groups of people:

1. He addresses the unmarried and the widows. (which includes **all** unmarried people – widowed; divorced; and those who have never been married)
2. Then he addresses married Christian couples (where husband **and** wife are both Christians)
3. Then he addresses Christians, who are married to an unbeliever. (and so given Paul's instructionⁱ a little bit later, that a Christian should **not** marry an unbeliever, presumably this refers to married couples, where one of them becomes a Christian, and the other does not)

Now, in all of this instruction, I want to say two things:

Firstly, When we read the bible, we have to understand, that we're **not** reading a legal document. The purpose of a **legal** document, is to very clearly (and unambiguously), communicate the terms and conditions, and to define the boundaries, that cannot be crossed. In a legal document,

there's no room for grace or mercy. In a legal document, there's no room for exaggeration or hyperbole.

Do you know what hyperbole is? It's where someone makes an over-the-top, outrageous statement, but it's said to make a point. So for example, Jesus said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose your eye, then for your whole body to be thrown into hell..." So, does Jesus really want us to pluck out our eye? I don't think so, and neither do you, because I see you've all still got both of them... What was the point Jesus was making? "Sin is an extremely **serious** matter. Don't continue in sin. It's really important that we make every effort, to deal with it, and we might have to give up some things in life, that cause us to sin..." That's an example of hyperbole.

Here's another one:

It's harder for a rich man to get into heaven, than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle – that's hyperbole...

And so a legal document wouldn't use such language. And it will usually begin with a section of Definitions, where almost every word used within the document, is clearly defined, so that there's no argument about what it means. And I am so glad that the bible isn't a legal document. Imagine this:

- *For God so loved the world, that in accordance with Section 9, subclause 6.32, paragraph(a),*
- *He gave His only begotten son, so that pursuant to Section 18, subclause 4.21, paragraph (f),*
- *whoever believes in Him, shall not perish (in accordance with Section 12, subclause 1.1, paragraph (c),*

- *but have everlasting life (unless otherwise stipulated in the terms and conditions of the agreement)*

Is anybody else glad the Bible is not a legal document???

And the second thing I want to share, is Paul's purpose for giving this advice. When we get to v35 (which won't be until next week), he tells us his purpose:

³⁵ I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

Alright, so what we're about to hear: (both today and next week)

- Is for our good
- He doesn't say it to lay any restraint upon us
- But it's to promote good order – alright, that what we do, is proper
- And it's to secure our undivided devotion to the Lord.

Righto:

1.

To the first group:

⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

(by the way, the original Greek doesn't have "with passion" – it just says **For it is better to marry than to burn**)

So, if you're **unmarried**, it's good to remain single. But if you find you have an uncontrollable longing for the physical intimacy, that should only be expressed in marriage, well maybe your gift **isn't** singleness, and you should get married. It's not a problem. And we'll talk more about that again next week.

2.

The second group, is Married Christian couples (where both husband **and** wife are Christians)

He says: ¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

God's plan for marriage, is for a life-long union, for a man and a woman.

I think I might've told you this story before, but I'll tell it again, because it's a good one:

Years ago, I badly smashed my ankle. They tried to repair it, but it didn't last, and so the best option, was to get the ankle fused. And the doctor said to me:, "This is likely to be the

biggest decision you'll ever make in your life. It's bigger than buying a house – it's bigger than choosing a job – it's bigger than getting married... – There's no going back.. Once it's done – it's done and can't be undone....

They took 2 bones, and joined them together to form one bone... And it'll be one bone forever. To part them, they would have to be smashed apart...

That doctor's view of marriage, was a shallow view of marriage – “If you're not compatible, you can just divorce and start over again”... But marriage should **not** be undone – to undo marriage, is just as traumatic as smashing a fused ankle apart.

And we have to take this very seriously. As Paul says, this isn't something he made up – this is something **Jesus** taught.

- Matthew 5
- Matthew 19
- Mark 10
- Luke 16

Every time, Jesus makes it very clear – Marriage should **not** be undone. If a married Christian couple, find themselves in conflict, divorce should **never** be seen as the solution. The aim, is for husband and wife to be reconciled to each other. It's not about making ourselves live with each other in unhappiness – it's about repentance; forgiveness; healing; restoration...

And as Christians, we should be helping husbands and wives, to **be** reconciled to each other.

But we live in a broken world. What if (over time), it becomes clear, that one of the parties will **not** repent, and they cannot **be** reconciled??? And now we're into a subject that many Christians disagree on – the topic of divorce and re-marriage.

Let's go to the teaching of Jesus. Paul said "This isn't my teaching. This is the teaching of Jesus.", so what **did** Jesus say?

Well I reckon the starting point for us, has to be, that divorce **is** possible. A marriage can **be** dissolved, but it **shouldn't** be. And this is a very important point. Because if as some people believe, our starting point is, that it is **impossible** to dissolve a marriage – (once you're married to a person, you're married to that person forever, and even if you do get a divorce, you're still married to that person) – If that's our starting point, there can never be a case for re-marriage after divorce. If it is **impossible** to dissolve a marriage, then a remarried person would be committing adultery, every time they had physical union, with their new husband or their new wife.

But as I study the Bible, I find that the biblical evidence is overwhelmingly clear, that a marriage can be dissolved – it just **shouldn't** be – unless the circumstances meet one of the biblical exceptions.

And the starting point, begins with the word and the concept of "divorce" itself.

- In both Old Testament and New Testament
- in both Hebrew and in Greek.
- In Old Testament culture;
- In Jewish culture;
- In Gentile culture;
- In our culture, ,,,

Divorce – the whole purpose of divorce, was and is to allow a divorced person, to remarry... That's what the word "divorce" means. That's what it has **always** meant.

What other evidence is there, that divorce can happen, but shouldn't?

How about the verses we just read: ¹⁰ ... **the wife should not separate from her husband** (clearly talking about divorce) ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain **unmarried**

Alright, so what is her marital state if she divorces her husband? Is she still married? No, she's not – she's unmarried.

Jesus Himself, when he met the woman at the well, said to her, "You've had 5 husbands, and now you're living with someone you're not married to"... If it was **impossible** to dissolve a marriage, He would have said to her, "You've had 1 husband, and then you've lived with 5 men since then."

In the **Old** Testament, it talks about remarriage following divorceⁱⁱ.

And so the biblical evidence is overwhelming, that it is **possible** to dissolve a marriage, but we shouldn't. But there are exceptions.

In Mark 10, Jesus said: ¹¹ "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Alright, that seems very hard and fast, doesn't it??? And Luke says something very similar

5 times in the New Testament, we're given teaching on divorce. 4 of them say "We should never get divorced". This is the principal. The principal is, "Marriage is so important, and it's not meant to be broken". This is the principal.

But 3 of them **also** give an exception, **to** the principal. Matthew 5 and Matthew 19, both give an exception in cases involving sexual immorality. And shortly we'll find another exception here in 1 Corinthians 7.

What's going on? Why do Mark and Luke, both indicate that divorce should never happen, and then Matthew **twice** states, that in cases of sexual immorality, a husband or a wife can get a divorce??? Did Matthew get it wrong? Did Mark and Luke get it wrong? No, not at all... Jesus, at one time, stated the general principal, and at another time, He included exceptions **to** the principal.

So, what should we take home from this?

I should view my marriage as unbreakable, and **you** should view **your** marriage as unbreakable. This is the principal. God's plan for marriage, is that husband and wife, model to each other, the reconciliation that Christ has with His church...

But we should **also** recognise, that in God's grace, when a husband or a wife, have had the heartache of broken marriage, in God's grace He allows divorce, because sometimes that is the only life-giving option. Sometimes, a marriage is already broken (such as in the case of adultery) (or maybe even other forms of abuse). And the purpose of divorce, is to free the person, for them to marry again.

In the Jewish divorce certificate, it specifically stated:
*"Behold, you are free to marry any man."*ⁱⁱⁱ

And next week, we're going to get to V27. It says "Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. And our English translations say "Are you free from a wife?" The Greek actually says, "Have you been 'loosed' from a wife?" "Have you been 'untied' from a wife?", **do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned...**

So, the first exception for divorce, is in the case of sexual immorality. The second exception, is in the case of 'desertion'.

3.

The third group Paul addresses, are those in the church, who were already married when they became a Christian, but their husband or their wife, didn't share, their new-found faith, and so one of them puts their faith in Christ, and the other one rejects Him.

And to these people, Paul says:

“If your spouse is willing to live with you, don't divorce them. And you don't have to worry that the one-flesh relationship is unclean – your holiness rubs off on them – It's not the other way around...”

Now, that doesn't mean that a faithless husband or the faithless wife is saved because their spouse is – it just means that the Christian spouse isn't tainted by the unsaved spouse. If God has made you holy, no one can take that holiness away from you (or from your children)...

But, if your unbelieving spouse is **not** willing to live with you, well there's not much that anybody can do about that – you're free.

^{v15} But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. ¹⁶ For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

What does it mean to be free? What does it mean to “not be enslaved”?... The most obvious and natural meaning, is “You are not **bound** to that other person anymore.” You are free to get married again – but only to another Christian...

So, there’s the second exception that the Bible gives.

Now, having shared what I believe is the simplest and clearest way of taking what the Bible teaches on divorce and remarriage, I **do** need to acknowledge that **some** Bible scholars believe that it’s **never** OK to remarry following divorce.

Some bible teachers who I read and listen to (and at times find very helpful), on this topic, disagree with what I said today. But they **are** in the minority. Most evangelical Bible scholars today, hold the position that I’ve just explained. Most of the leaders of the reformation, also hold this position... But not everybody does...

The Roman Catholic Church (for instance), hold a very high view of marriage – that it is a sacrament, and it’s something that cannot be undone, which is why a broken marriage has to be “annulled” prior to remarriage being allowed...

Why do people hold such different positions on whether divorce is ever permissible (or even possible)??? It’s because the Bible isn’t a legal document. If it were a legal document,

there would be no exceptions – there would only be law, boundary and penalty...

Instead, God's word very clearly defines a principle, of what is right and best, and yet, as with every other form of brokenness, in God's grace and mercy, when our greatest intentions end in brokenness – in Christ, there remains freedom.... Does God consign everyone who's suffered a broken marriage, to a life of loneliness and celibacy?? I don't believe so.

You may disagree, and that's OK. But whatever conclusion you or I come to on this topic, it's very important that we remember, that within the Christian church, this **is** a debatable issue, and so none of us should judge those, who hold a different position to what we do.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,
We want to thank you today, for the gift of singleness.
And we thank you for the gift of marriage.
Lord, we pray for all those here today, who **are** married.
We ask that you would strengthen our marriages.

Lord, we pray for those marriages, where physical intimacy has gone cold.
Stoke the fires of passion,
That husband and wife would give themselves to one another.
That men would be the husbands that their wives need them to be;

That women would be the wives, that their husbands need them to be.

And Lord, where there is hurt; anguish; bitterness within a marriage,
We pray that you would bring repentance, forgiveness, healing and peace.

That husband would be reconciled to wife,
And wife reconciled to husband.

We also pray for those who **are** divorced.
We ask that you would heal their spirit.
And we pray for those who have married again.
Lord, may they honour You in their marriage.
Make them strong.
And in their marriage,
May they be a witness to Your mercy; Your grace;
And Your restoring power.

Lord, forgive us for when we have wrongly judged others.
Forgive us for building barriers in our marriages,
Or within **other** people's marriages.
And help us to be a people who honour you,
In marriage; in singleness;, and in family life,
In Jesus' name,
Amen.

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 7:39

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 24:1-4

ⁱⁱⁱ William A Heth, in Strauss Mark L., Remarriage after Divorce – Three views in Today's church. Counterpoints series. Zondervan: Grand Rapids. 2006