

I Corinthians 1 - 7
“Divorce”
I Corinthians 7:10-16

Tonight is our next to last night in our I Corinthians which covered 1 to 7. And we're going to move to the life of David in a couple weeks from Samuel. But tonight we are going to talk about what the Bible has to say about divorce in I Corinthians 7.

Just a couple things before we stand for the reading of God's Word. I want to make it clear that divorce is always tragic, and that we don't want anyone to feel condemned tonight if they're divorced? I'm not trying to do that. I haven't been here long enough to speak at anybody. but we do need to hear what God has to say. Because, as Rob said a little while ago, just about everybody here has either had a divorce themselves, some probably not a great number who are here or had family members experience or suffer a divorce. Certainly we have friends who either have had a divorce and don't know what to do or thinking about it, and so we're all counselors, I think, as opportunity arises and prayer partners for people, I do believe that as a church, we talked about this last week, we want to care for all single people, including people who are divorced. But with that said in advance, I do want to just go over what this is like. I want to give a straightforward exposition of I Corinthians 7:10-16. I'll open and close with illustrations, but other than that, just straight through the text. And would you stand, please, for the reading of God's Word? This is Paul answering another question from the church in Corinth. It's God's word to the married

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.

12 To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. **13** If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. **14** For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. **15** But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you^[a] 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?

Let's pray for a moment. Lord give us, we pray the ability to take in your wisdom. Apply it in our age, in this, in this church, the people we know, we pray. In Jesus name, Amen. Please be seated.

I've seen this probably 10 or 15 over the years and it goes like this. I'm in the pastor's office and there are chairs or usually several chairs, and the husband and wife are sitting about as far apart as they can. Maybe it's a small office. They're only eight feet apart, but in a small office, eight feet is a long distance, and the wife is declaring her position on their marriage as it stands today. Her face is hard. His face is

puffy, looks dejected, maybe even despairing. She says, I don't love him anymore. I'm not sure I ever did for ten years. And then comes a litany of his offenses. Maybe he was never around. He never spoke a word except for anger. I can't waste any more of my life on him. And then it's his turn. And he has his head down, his hands folded, his eyes looking at the floor. He says, I know I'm not always the best husband. I work too much. I don't talk enough. But I do love you. He lifts his head. And I'll do anything to save this marriage. And we wonder what's going to happen next. By which I mean next couple of minutes, but also in the next weeks and months. Wonder does he have anything else he needs to confess that brought her to this spot? Will it matter to her if he does? Will he really change? Will she give him a chance as she found someone better? Unfortunately, the answer is often yes.

Now no one knows exactly how often people divorce. You have to wait until someone dies to know if their marriage lasted until the end. But most people estimate not 50%, but more like 40% of all first time marriages end in divorce, maybe 43%, and more. Second and most third time marriages do end in divorce. Now, if you ask, is the church doing any better? The answer is mixed. Catholics by my poles seem to divorce around 25% of the time. Protestants more than that. Presbyterians, may I say 28%. We rank pretty well. There are actually Protestant denominations that, according to studies, end up in divorce 45% of the time, more than the national average. We wonder how that happens.

Certainly, divorce is way too common in our country. It goes back to some degree to 1971. No fault divorce was instituted in California and then more or less swept the land. It meant that you could get divorce without any clearly stated grounds. People sometimes call it will divorce. I want to divorce you, therefore I will divorce you when someone has a spouse who wants to get a divorce and the other the other spouse doesn't want to get a divorce. All the spouse that wants to save the marriage can really do is slow things down. You cannot force someone to stay in a marriage legally in America. And Paul, of course, addresses that. Now we live in an age of easy divorce. And curiously, the New Testament era was very similar. There was one big difference, and that is that men could divorce their wives quite easily, and wives had to get maybe their father or a judge or somebody like that.

Women could not divorce their wives as easily. But, divorce could be pretty casually dissolved to some extent. All you had to do was start walking out of town and not come back because you couldn't find people in that age. It's not like people had credit cards and phones and so forth. If somebody walked 25 miles over a couple hills, past a bridge and a river, the marriage was over, usually at the whim of the male.

Now, in I Corinthians 7, I've been here last couple of weeks, Paul's putting a series of questions. Sorry. He's answering service questions that the Corinthians asked him. And one of the questions was, what does the Bible have to say about divorce? Now the context is, first of all, that there was a lot of sexual license, actually three context.

One is the cultural context. Easy divorce at that time, much like our own day. That's number one.

The second one is a lot of sexual license. And Paul said it's good for everyone to get married because of prevailing temptations. But it's also true that after he said, get married and give each other your conjugal rights, your bodies are not your own.

He also said, we studied this last week, that that in some occasions singleness is preferable and if singles is preferable, the question largely comes up and Paul connects the questions. If singleness is preferable,

maybe married people should get a divorce, and especially if a believer is married to an unbeliever. That's the question that arises here.

Now, the last context, and I just want to walk through the Bible quickly, is the whole teaching of the Bible about divorce.

And if I remind you, Genesis chapter two says that God instituted the first marriage and said to the first couple, you need to hold fast. Adam and Eve should hold fast to each other. That is to say, let nothing separate you. Over in the New Testament, Paul translates it with a word that means glue. You should be glued together.

If you know anything about woodworking, you know that if you're doing your job well, a piece of wood will break anywhere except where the glue has made its bond. So you should almost break yourself before you break your marriage. That's what Genesis and Paul quoting Genesis two in Ephesians, say Deuteronomy tells us that if a man divorces his wife and she remarries, he may never take her again.

You may think to yourself, well, that's not much of an impediment, but remember, remember, number one, a man in the Old Testament could divorce pretty easily as long as he gave a certificate that said, you're free to remarry. And in that culture, most women needed to live under a husband. And so people remarried pretty fast. Therefore, don't divorce your wife.

You may not have another chance to reclaim her. So says Deuteronomy 24 over in Malachi, God says words that I want to make sure we understand I hate divorce. That does not mean that God hates all divorced people. It doesn't mean that every last person who is divorced is under God's wrath. It means that God hates divorce. He compares it to an act of violence.

Man toward his wife. And it's an act that seems to forget that marriage is a covenant. When people divorce hastily, they ordinarily are viewing marriage as a contract arrangement between two people to make each other happy. Husband says, you're not making me happy anymore. And so he wants to get away.

God hates divorce does not mean that every divorce is sinful, and that everyone who got a divorce committed a sin. We see this, for example, in the fact that Joseph was going to divorce his wife quietly. Mary, because she was pregnant and not by him before they got married. Now, in those days, betrothal was virtually the same as marriage.

And so she was unfaithful. So it seemed to Joseph's eyes if she was unfaithful before they ever got married, then he's going to put her aside and the Bible reports it, but does not condemn it, which means that there are such things as grounds of divorce. If someone is massively unfaithful, God hates it. But it doesn't mean it's a sin necessarily.

It could be a sin and it might not be a sin. Matthew chapter 19. I'm gonna invite you to turn in your Bible with me to Matthew chapter 19 for a moment. Matthew 19 takes up this question in his own day and Paul's own day, and the Jewish leaders come to Jesus and they ask him a question. And if you have different translations, is translated slightly different ways, but the question goes like this.

First just came up to Jesus, Matthew 19 verse three and said, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause? Some translations add any cause whatsoever in other translations, say, for any and every reason

what they mean. What the Pharisees meant was can I divorce my wife on any pretext whatsoever? Because that's the way some viewed it.

Some religious leaders in Jesus' day taught that if wife if your wife simply gets mouthy, that's a ground of divorce. They taught that it's recorded that they taught that. Or if she becomes ugly, that's a ground of divorce. Some people find that funny, obviously. I'm not sure exactly why, but they do. And my wife is part of the group. I don't know what's going on here. I'll try to regain my composure.

Now, today when people get divorced heedlessly, they say things like, we're not happy anymore. We've drifted apart. I've grown as a person and he has not. And so forth. These are at will divorce kinds of statements that people make. What does Jesus say about the grounds of divorce? Jesus says, first of all, in Matthew chapter 19, when people get divorced, although it's true that adultery is a crown of divorce, which Jesus teaches in Matthew chapter five, there's no divorce except for Poonima, which is the broadest possible word for every kind of sexual sin.

He says. The truth of the matter is in verse eight of chapter 19, because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives. But from the beginning it was not. So I say to you, whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality, Jesus is repeating what he said in Matthew five, marries another, commits adultery. That is, if you heedlessly throw your wife away, you're essentially committing adultery.

And in Matthew chapter five he says, you're probably going to force her into a relationship that's illicit. But he says, most importantly, that the core issue in divorce is hardness of heart. At least speaking to the Pharisees on that occasion, that is to say, we have a tendency in our circles to say, well, what are the grounds of divorce?

And it's really the wrong question. The real question is, are you willing to continue and try to heal relationship or your friends? You're talking to, your friends or your friends willing to try to restore to heal a relationship? Or are they looking for reasons to divorce? Now, I'm not going to deny that when and when someone commits adultery again and again and again and again, there's a time to say, you know what?

I give up on this, on this person. Have no interest in a true marriage together. But Jesus says, ordinarily, the real cause of divorce is hardness of heart toward each other. And we take that to heart ourselves. Well, people might say, well, wait a second. don't we teach in the church that there are two or maybe even three grounds of divorce, adultery?

One and number two abandonment. Haven't we said that? And number three, maybe abuse. Because if your life's endangered, surely you have to save your life. Save the life of your children. Isn't that the case? So let's see why the church has said that. Why this church has said that over the years. So first Corinthians chapter seven. But your first Corinthians, chapter seven, and ask you to notice that in verse ten, Paul makes it clear that he's quoting Jesus when he says to the married, I give this charge, not I, but the Lord.

What he means is I'm quoting Jesus here. They didn't have quotation marks in those days. I'm not sure the word quote even existed at that time. But he's saying I'm repeating Jesus words here in verses ten and 11. And then in verse 12, he's not saying, hey, you don't need to listen to what I say. I'm just an apostle.

He's saying to the rest, I say, I, not the Lord. Paul knows he has authority. He says things in other places, really? In chapter seven and chapter 14 of First Corinthians, this is the rule I laid down in all the churches. He's enough. He's an apostle. He knows he has authority. What he's saying is, I'm not quoting Jesus.

Jesus didn't address this in verse 12 when he says, I, not the Lord, speak. So what does he say? He says that in fact you can have a divorce under certain circumstances for what we call today abandonment specifically, this passage has three parts. First, Paul forbids divorce. In general, don't get divorce. Then he says, if you do get a divorce, what you need to do is stay single or I'll seek reconciliation.

And third, he says, don't get divorced just because your wife or your husband is an unbeliever, unless they're bound and determined to leave, in which case let them go. That's what the passage says. So the first word is don't divorce. That's my first word. All of you don't divorce each other. If you're here with your spouse, don't do it.

Stay married. Work it out. Have a conversation. Pray. Get help. Don't get a divorce. And if you have friends. Tell your friends. Don't get a divorce. Heal your relationship. Bind things together again. Find a way to mend what was broken. Remember what was there when you were first in love? There was something that drew you there. When somebody says, I'm not sure I ever loved them, tell them hogwash.

That's the dirtiest word I can use. Horse collar. Fiddlesticks. Fae, whatever word you want to use, tell them no. You're just talking about the present. You did love each other. Try to remember what it was. Work it out.

Why? You should not separate from her husband. If she does, she's your main single, unmarried or else be reconciled. Her husband. Same word for the wife, he says. I'm quoting Jesus on this and he is. Now some people say, well, look at look at the text. It says the wife should not separate in one place. Another place says the wife should not divorce.

The husband should not divorce. Are we talk about separation temporarily and so forth. The Bible doesn't use the word separation the way people talk about it today, you know, indefinitely equal separation. In the Bible, there was no word or touch of a word for divorce. If you divorced, you separated to separate was to divorce, to divorce was to divorce.

The Bible just calls it leaving in another place. If you leave the marriage, if you just walk 40 miles and don't come back, that's also a divorce. Please also notice that men and women are on equal footing as shows up over and over in first Corinthians. The rights of men and women are exactly the same. The wife shouldn't divorce, her husband should not divorce.

He addresses men and women as equals, which is astonishing in their culture. And you should remain unmarried or be reconciled. That's the first word. The second word is found in verses 12 to 14 and 12 to 14. If I may read it again for you. With you, Paul says to the rest, I say, I, not the Lord. This is my ruling as an apostle.

If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever and she consents, it could be translated, thinks it's a good idea to live with him. He should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever

and he consents or thinks well of the idea that they live together, she should not divorce him now, why would you ask a question like that?

You would ask a question like that because in Corinth, which is a completely pagan city, when they had nothing of the gospel of Christ known in that culture, until Paul came, God gave many converts. He stayed there 18 months after very brief, persecution ridden forays in other cities like this one I can Berea. And in that time, by God's grace, according to God's promise to Paul, there were many people who came to know him in that city.

It was a pagan, completely pagan city, and people were polytheists Zeus, Hermes, Apollo, Aphrodite, etc. they were polytheists. Some of them were atheists. They followed stoicism, perhaps, which was essentially an atheistic, religion, or Epicureanism, also atheistic. And in a marriage which has one person convert and the other doesn't. And the Christian had to think, how can I follow the Lord when my spouse is given over to complete paganism? Polytheism, or to atheism? Surely, given that we know, Paul says, that the single life is good anyway, surely be better to be freed of this person whose values now totally clash with mine. And Paul says no, marriage is an abiding covenant. God brought you together. God is sovereign over all things. He's sovereign over the decisions you made even before you became a believer.

So stay there. I'm telling you, I'm speaking. Jesus never addressed this. This question couldn't come up in Jesus own life because Jesus was speaking of the Jews, all of whom were, at least outwardly or technically believers. Right? I'm not saying they had faith in their heart, but every Jew went to the temple. They all did. They all said they were believers.

And so the question would never come to Jesus. What do you do when you're married to a pagan? So Paul says, the question comes to me, and here's the answer. Stay with your spouse. By the way, this I say not. I say Jesus said, I say in Paul is the little argument against red letter Bibles. Paul's not saying my words don't count as much as Jesus words.

That's not what he's saying. He's just saying, here's what I'm quoting. But all words in the Bible of equal standing, the red Letter Bible, these are the words to Jesus is a publisher's invention. It's not what God intends for our view of the Bible. Okay, so what does Paul say next? What else does he have to say? He says later on.

He says if your spouse leaves, you can remarry. But only in the Lord. That's in chapter seven, verse 39, that is to say, stay married to an unbeliever if they want to stay married. But he also says, don't get married to an unbeliever. Don't enter willingly into a relationship with an unbeliever. We, of course teach that and believe that.

But if the unbeliever wants to stay, then stay. And when he says stay, he doesn't mean this is my advice to you. He means this is my command to you. Stay married. If your unbelieving spouse wants to stay married. And again he says it with total symmetry. If the brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, if the woman has a husband, is an unbeliever, remain married.

Now what's the good news here? The good news is found in verse 14. Why does he say we should stay married to an unbeliever? The answer in verse 14 is because the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children will be unclean. But as it is there. Holy. This is wonderful news for everyone who's married. I'm

sure there are people in this church who are married to unbelievers. For everyone who's married to an unbeliever, please understand your life is not contaminated by the fact you're living with an unbeliever. You are still holy. Your children are still holy. We can still baptize our children if one parent believes.

Now you may say, why is that? Why is what? Why does it not teach that an unbeliever? Surely the unbeliever corrupts the whole home and Paul says, God sets the whole apart. That's his gift and his grace. Let me explain it through a scene in Jesus' life. Remember that when Jesus was first coming down off the mountain, Matthew chapter eight, from the sermon on the Mount, somebody came up to him.

Remember who it was. Anybody remember who was? It was a leper. And as the leper came up to Jesus, Jesus reached out to touch him. Now, every Jew in the spot around at that time would have said, no, don't touch him. You're going to catch us unclean. This. But Jesus touched him. Remember what happened? The leper caught clean this from Jesus.

And that's a fact that functions metaphor quickly. That is to say, the believer is no longer fundamentally corrupted by the unbeliever, but rather the unbeliever is quote unquote corrupt, said, or changed by the believer. That's an attitude we can have in our marriages, in our workplaces. When you're next to an unbeliever, think to yourself, this person is not going to drag me down.

I can pull them up. That's the mentality we should have. We catch cleaners from Christ and we give cleanness or holiness to others. We are sanctified.

Then he gives us a little more hope. Look at verse 15.

If the unbeliever. Sorry, a little more hope in verse 16, I'm going to just jump ahead a tiny bit. I'll read 15 and 16 one more time. but if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. That is to say, let them separate, let them go. In such cases, the brother sister is not enslaved or bound or.

God has called you to peace.

When? Go to the happy part, verse 16 for a second.

We're not bound. God has called us to peace. Then this word. How do you know, wife? Whether you will save your husband. How do you know husband? Whether you will save your wife. Now it's possible to hear this word. How do you know? In a sort of a pessimistic way. I mean, how do you know if you stay married with somebody?

How do you know that they're going to ever come to faith? Answers you don't know. They will come to faith. It's possible to take it negatively, you know, don't stay with your marriage because you never know if it will actually work out. But there are actually good reasons to think we should be optimistic. The first reason is that Paul says the unbelievers sanctified by the Christian spouse in verse 14.

It's also true that over in first Peter chapter three, the Lord tells us that an unbelieving spouse can live such a beautiful life that their spouse is won over to the gospel by the sheer beauty of their life, even possibly without a word, because the unbeliever knows the source of their faith. Beyond all that. Stay married, he says.

Why would you stay married? You stay married because there's a hope that God will do a work in their life. So we don't despair of the unbelieving spouse wants to stay in the marriage. We stay in the

marriage. We have hopes in the gospel, in the work of Christ. Now he does also say in verses 15 and 16:15 that sometimes it is inevitable that people get a divorce.

Divorce is always a result of sin. Doesn't mean everybody who gets a divorce is the sinner. Everything that tears a marriage apart is tragic, but sometimes you do have to let go. That's what he says in verse 15. If the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. If the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. What it literally says is, if the unbelieving partner separates, let them separate.

And then the Greek let them separate doesn't mean I permitting the separate. It's actually a command. If your unbelieving spouse is bound and determined to leave, let them go. No, that seems like a strong statement. Let me illustrate from a real, real cases that I've been involved in as a pastor. I'm going to run 2 or 3 of them together. I'll make it into one

A man is married to a woman. He seems to want to get out of the marriage. In fact, he seems to be doing everything he possibly can to pull out of the marriage. And the wife is trying to save the marriage. Save the marriage. Talk, pray, go to counselors, do everything she can, and one day he says, we'll call him Xavier. Xavier says to his wife, listen, I'm leaving. I'm going to another continent. I mean, raising every fragment of information about me that I can. You don't follow me. You won't find me. And if you do find me, I won't even talk to you. Now, in a case like that. And the wife being a believer and Xavier being an unbeliever, God says, let them go if they're bound and determined to leave. You can't let them leave. In Jesus and Paul's day, if you simply walked over the nearest hill and kept walking, if you walked 50 miles, the marriage was over. If you never came back, if your spouse leaves you, you can't force someone to stay in a marriage and God has called us to peace. You can leave translations very.

Let them go. Let it be so. If they determined divorce, let them divorce. If they're bound to leave you, then agree to it. Let it go. Sometimes it's time to say the marriage has absolutely ended. Paul speaks about the same thing, same issue over in Romans chapter seven. He says in these cases, a believing person is not bound, is not enslaved to the marriage that has come to an end.

God has called you to peace. God has called you to peace means if you did your best, you did your best. And you can say, I did. And I've said this to people. I've said to people, you have done everything anybody could possibly do to save their marriage, and they left you. Don't condemn yourself. Don't second guess yourself where you perfect?

No, but live in peace knowing you did your best. They left. They're gone. They've abandoned you. They've declared it to be so. Now, of course, peace is not simply that peace. We also have the peace of hoping at all points that a marriage can somehow be saved. And if I may, I'm going to end with a story about a marriage that was saved.

Some of you know the name Walter Wanger, and give me a nod of the head or a wave of the finger, if you know the name Walter Wanger in few people, not very many in certain circles. Walter Wanger in was, a revered Christian writer. He wrote a book about marriage, actually, and he wrote Christian novels, and he wrote poems. And he was a pastor, and Walter was married to a woman named Ruthann. And Walter was the quintessential busy pastor. He was preaching and teaching and meeting with people and counseling from morning to night. He was a man with enormous energy. His wife did not have enormous energy, and she would go to sleep at 9 p.m. and he would go to sleep at 1:00 am. After four hours of writing his novels and his poems and his wonderful talks and not only did he stay up for hours after she

did so, they never went to bed together. He was busy all day long, and slowly Ruthanne became a very lonely woman, and it lasted long enough that she eventually decided to stop talking to him. And that went on for months. And her explanation to herself was, my husband has deserted me in my own house. And not only so, but as he's gotten more and more consumed with his books and his novels and his poems and his teaching, he has begun to think less of me. And when we get together with friends, which doesn't happen very often, he belittles me. He makes jokes about how much I sleep compared to him at my expense, and he noticed eventually that she was silent. And then one day she couldn't stand her silence anymore. And she didn't say, well, you forgive me, or we talk to me or let's work on our marriage. She simply said, Will you hug me? And Walter was consumed with bliss that they were talking, and they hugged and he went to bed.

That night he slept in Paradise in jubilation as he tells it, but he didn't notice it. The next day, nothing had changed for Ruth and he kept all of his appointments. And he walked down to supper and he went out for a meeting after church and returned. And she went to bed. At nine he worked to 1:00 and when he came back that night, he could feel that his wife, who'd been asleep for hours, was frowning even in her sleep, and he spoke to her. He said, Ruth Ann, are you dreaming? No. Are you happy? He asked. No answer. Did something go wrong today? Very long pause, she said. It's the same thing, Wally. You bounce back so quickly. You bounce so high that you leave it behind and you're glad. And I'm glad that you're glad, but you're very glad. This means that everything's just the same as it was. The only way I can get you to see me is to ruin your gladness. But I love you, Wally. How could I hurt you to make you notice me so I can't. So everything stays the same. Be happy. And who knew that she meant be happy without me? You'll never change. And her silence convinced Walter that he had to change.

He said, we need to be together. Oh, forgive me, Lord. Forgive me, Ruth, and forgive me for sounding so businesslike. But what I need to do is write you in my calendar. I need to make you an inviolable appointment. We'll spend an hour before supper. I'll go home. We'll talk. We'll walk together. And Ruth Ann was awake, but she didn't move because she hoped. But she didn't trust. But the good news is, Walt did change. He changed his ways. He began to go to bed with his wife sometimes, not all the time, because he had a lot more energy than she did. It's not a sin to be energetic, but he went to bed with her sometimes, and they did have appointments before supper, and they did spend more time, and they did talk about their days. And he planned time together, and he planned to win her and woo her and be reconciled to her again. And she was as possible as possible to come back together again.

And I say that to all of you, I said to you and to your friends who are on the edge of despair, first, be reconciled to your brother. The Bible says, first, be reconciled. The Lord. In this case it says, first, be reconciled to your husband, to your wife. It can be done by the grace of God the Lord, who reconciled us to himself. A far greater God can reconcile us to each other.

Let's pray.

Heavenly father, I do pray that we would. Hear what you have to say. Hard things about mixed marriages and people wanting to leave. And we need to know what your standards are. We need to not pursue divorce willy nilly for every and every cause. We need to be clear that there are just a handful of reasons to get divorce, and the hope is always for reconciliation. Lord, I don't know how many people here actually need this sermon tonight. I know that some do. And I know that we all have friends who do, and I pray that we would give hope and direction, and that you would give healing when people seek it and bring them back together again. We pray in Jesus name.

Amen.