

# ANSWERS ON DIVORCE

by Ray C. Stedman

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In the seventh chapter of First Corinthians, the Apostle Paul leads us into confrontation with one of the major social problems of our day, and that is the breakup of marriages.

Next month my wife and I will be celebrating our 33rd wedding anniversary. It is rather rare to find that kind of a long-lived marriage these days, though once it was commonplace. In fact, it seemed to me when I was a young man that almost everybody I knew had been married for 30 or 40 years.

The divorce statistics are frightening: It used to be that here in California we led the whole nation -- two out of three marriages break up -- but now that same figure is becoming true of the nation as a whole. And in many other countries divorce rates are climbing with similar frequency. Last night I saw a cartoon in the newspaper that showed a father speaking to his daughter just before her wedding. He said, "Try to make it last, dear, at least until I can pay for the wedding!" I think that summarizes the attitude of many today toward marriage.

Yet with this widespread and frightening increase in marriage breakup, we are really only repeating the conditions that were true in Corinth when this letter was written. Divorce was rather rare in Jewish communities then, but in these great Greek cities such as Athens and Corinth, and other Roman cities, divorce was a frequent thing. Even women could divorce their husbands and did so very easily in those days, so that here in Corinth the apostle addresses a condition that is very much like we have right here in California, and in America, today. And his word to us in this chapter is right on target. He understands the pressures behind the breakup of marriage; he is thoroughly familiar with the acceptance of divorce by the world around, and the temptations this creates to Christians to take what looks like an easy way out of an unhappy or difficult marriage.

He begins in Verse 10 of Chapter 7 with a word about marriage in general:

**To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) -- and that the husband should not divorce his wife. {1 Cor 7:10-11 RSV}**

There the apostle begins with the fundamental position of Scripture on marriage, and that is that marriage is intended to be for life. God's intention in giving marriage to our race was that a man and a woman should live together, as the marriage vows put it, "for better or for worse" (either one), "until death shall us part." Therefore, marriage was intended to be for life. Wives are not to leave their husbands, difficult as a marriage may become; husbands are not to divorce their wives even if they appear to be almost "irreconcilably incompatible," to use modern terms about the breakup of marriage.

There is no quibble possible about this. This is not a passage you can debate as to what the apostle means. He comes right out and makes it crystal clear; it is not in doubt in the least degree. Furthermore, this statement rests upon the most solid foundation. Paul says, "I charge you this," and here he uses a term he very seldom employs. The full weight of apostolic authority is brought to bear on this question. "As an apostle, an appointed spokesman of the Lord himself," he says, "this is his word to us." Then he goes even further back to the Lord's own recorded words and quotes the teaching of Jesus himself on divorce when he was here in the flesh. These are recorded for us in the 5th and 19th chapters of Matthew, and in the 10th chapter of Mark. Three different times in the Gospel the account is given of our Lord's words in this regard.

Now some have misunderstood what Paul is saying here. They take it to mean that when he says, "He says something," and, "The Lord says something," that Paul's word is at a lower authoritative level than the Lord's. But that is to misunderstand entirely what the apostle is saying, for both the word of an apostle and the direct word of the Lord are equally authoritative for all who are Christians. An apostle only gives what the

Lord himself has already given him. Apostles do not invent doctrine, nor are they free to add to what the Lord has told them or take away from it. There is no difference of level here between the apostolic word and the word of the Lord. The contrast is not between the inspired teaching of the Lord and the uninspired teaching of an apostle, but rather the contrast is between what the Lord himself uttered directly and what he has uttered indirectly through his apostle. In either case the authority is the Lord.

I want to make that as clear as possible because of some confusion that abounds today about the authority of an apostle. After the service, therefore, do not come up and hand me someone's book, *How God Led Me to Leave My Wife and Children*, because I do not believe that God leads in that regard. He has made very clear both in the New and the Old Testaments what he thinks of divorce. In the Book of Malachi God comes out and bluntly puts it, "I hate divorce," {Mal 2:16 RSV}. God did not intend divorce to interrupt marriages.

Having said that, it is also necessary to say, and it is also true, that God permits divorce. "Oh," you say, "you mean God permits what God hates?" Yes. Of course he does. All of life is made up of much of God permitting what God hates. God hates sin, but he allows it to continue in our race and he allows people to make wrong decisions even though he hates the decisions they make. We are faced everywhere in Scripture with the permissive will of God. This is on par with the scriptural statement that God is not willing that any should perish. Yet many do perish. All those who do not come to some believing faith in Jesus Christ will perish -- they are already perishing. Though God is not willing that any should perish, he does allow it to happen, and this is the same thing here. There is a place, therefore, for divorce.

It was not Moses who permitted divorce in Israel; it was God speaking through Moses. Many refer to our Lord's statement (referred to here by Paul in this passage), when the Lord was teaching on marriage and divorce and he said, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted divorce," {cf, Matt 19:8 KJV}. Many have read that as though Moses initiated the whole process, that it was Moses who thought up divorce.

Now Moses, a prophet, is like one of the apostles. He is a spokesman for God, and Moses had no authority and no right to interpose his own desires or understanding or will over what God had said. Therefore, it was not Moses who decided to let people get divorced; it was God who spoke through Moses, and thus permitted divorce. Any realistic handling of the problem of marriage and divorce must face the fact that God does allow divorce, and under some circumstances permits it, and permits remarriage after divorce. We have to put it within that context to begin with.

The Lord himself acknowledges this. He says it is hardness of heart that creates conditions that can lead to divorce. What is "hardness of heart?" Well, it really means a stubborn willfulness, a refusal to listen to what God has to say and a determination to do it your own way. That is a hardened heart. A soft heart is one that is open to instruction, one that is willing to listen to what God is saying and to try to obey it and to walk softly before God expecting him to help fulfill what he has asked. That is a softened heart. A hardened heart is exactly the opposite. It is one partner or the other, or both, determining that he or she is not going to pay any attention to what God has said. They want their own way; they want it the way they have chosen, and they want it now. That is a hardened heart.

You see it in the case of Pharaoh of Egypt, back in the days when Moses was sent to him. He hardened his heart; he determined to do it his way; he refused to give heed to the God of Glory who was speaking to him and insisted on carrying it out according to his own desire.

That kind of condition, a hardened heart, can turn a marriage into a living hell. It can make it so unhappy, and so dangerous, even, that one partner or the other feels that he or she must leave. And Paul seems to be facing that here. He has that in view when he adds the words, "the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does ...)" That is a recognition that some marriages are almost impossible to bear up with.

I have counseled wives who have sat before me with both eyes so black and swollen they could not see out of them, with bruises all over their bodies because their husbands had beaten them up. Now when that occurs -- sometimes even to the degree that their lives are threatened -- there is no reason why a woman should have to live under those conditions in marriage, and it is perfectly proper for her to leave for a while. Sometimes it is

the only way of bringing a husband to his senses, and the apostle seems to face that, but he adds some very strict controls. He says, "if she does, let her remain single..." The marriage is not broken just because it has become impossible to go on with. If she leaves even for a temporary separation, or, if it is a long continued problem, even if she gains a divorce, yet in God's sight the marriage is not broken.

Remember we are not dealing with the Law as Christians: We are dealing with God and reality and what is ultimately true, regardless of what the fluctuations of the Law may allow. In God's sight the marriage is not broken, therefore, "let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband)." In other words she is not to remarry because that would create a broken marriage involving, in this case, some form of adultery. Therefore, while her mate lives and remains unmarried (or while his mate lives and remains unmarried, because this would apply to a man as well as a woman), she or he is not to remarry, for there is always the possibility that the grace of God can work to restore and reconcile that marriage.

I could recount to you several instances of wives (in a couple of cases husbands), who have waited patiently through years of single life with little hope apparent on the surface that their mates would ever be changed. Yet God in grace has changed them and their marriages have been restored after years of brokenness, and gone on to happiness and joy. There are some right here in this congregation who have gone through that. So the apostle's word is, "There is no ground for remarriage when a divorce occurs on the basis of incompatibility of such a degree that it makes the marriage impossible. They are to remain single, with the possibility of reconciliation."

"Well," somebody says, "what about sexual infidelity? I understand that breaks a marriage. Didn't Jesus say that if there is adultery, sexual infidelity, that a marriage would be broken?" And the answer is, "Yes. He does say that." Three times in the Gospels it is recorded that our Lord says that divorce is wrong unless it be for adultery, for sexual infidelity. That does end a marriage. "Well," you ask, "why doesn't Paul mention that here?" I think the reason is because he has just dealt at length with the subject of sex in marriage. He has pointed out how central the sexual union is to marriage. He has even warned couples not to defraud one another, not to refuse it, not to stay away from sexual union very long, because it is central to the working out of God's purposes in marriage. It has valuable lessons to teach us when understood properly and when used according to the Word of God. Therefore, Paul does not dwell on that point because he has just referred to our Lord's teaching on marriage and divorce. I am sure he felt that this exception that the Lord himself granted was widely understood and known, and so he does not mention it.

It would be absolutely unthinkable that Paul should hope to change the Lord's own teaching by a deliberate ignoring of the exception the Lord granted. Paul would never do that. He saw himself as bound by the word of Jesus, and what Jesus said must ultimately stand. So there is that principle granted in the Word of God, that recognition that infidelity destroys a marriage.

But it can be repented of and it can be forgiven. There are marriages represented here this morning where couples have been on the very verge of a breakup because of sexual infidelity, but that has been repented of and their mate in God has forgiven them, and a marriage has been restored and gone on to a new level of beauty and enjoyment that they never had dreamed was possible. I have seen it happen many times. But if it is not repented of, or it is a repeated pattern that occurs again and again, then there is no question but that does break a marriage. Divorce granted on that basis frees an individual to remarry again because the previous one has been ended by the infidelity of the partner.

Now among Christians -- actually, among all men -- divorce is not permitted on any other grounds. And God expects Christians, above all, to obey what he has to say along this line. Therefore, the word of the apostle here clearly is, "Work out your problems within marriage. Either that, or, if you cannot conceivably do so and a divorce occurs, then remain single." I think that is crystal clear.

God did not design marriage to be beautiful and happy, necessarily, right from the very beginning. Very few marriages are. God designed marriage as a kind of a locked room into which he thrusts a couple who think they know each other very well. He turns the key in the lock, throws the key away, and says, "Now get to know each other, regardless of what happens." That is what marriage is for. It is to provide an unbreakable bond, a security within which you work out the difficulties that may arise. Therefore, the modern view of

divorce as a kind of an escape lever that you pull when you do not like the way things are going is absolutely contrary to the Scriptures and the teaching of God.

So Paul has answered questions in this section about the married and the formerly married. Now he takes up what he calls "the rest" by which he means mixed marriages, marriages in which one partner is a Christian and one is still non-Christian, and, in the case of marriages here in Corinth, probably pagan, and associated with idol worship. He says, Verse 12:

**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 should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is consecrated ["sanctified" is the word] through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. For God has called us to peace. Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife?" {1 Cor 7:12-16 RSV}**

Again in this section Paul is not speaking of two levels of authority. He simply means when he says, "I say this, not the Lord," that the Lord had not, in the days of his flesh, spoken directly to this issue, but after his resurrection and in the many appearances which he had made to the Apostle Paul he had given him counsel in this area. Therefore, what Paul says comes with equal authority as with the Lord himself.

It is clear here in this passage that marriage is not just for Christians. I have had couples come to me, and say, "Well, we got married when we were still non-Christians." Or I have had individuals say, "I got married before I became a Christian. Now I have become a Christian, and I do not think that first marriage was 'in the Lord,' therefore, I think I ought to be able to get a divorce." They imply by that that marriage really is only given to Christians. But it is not. Marriage was given to the race. Non-Christians get married as well as Christians, and God recognizes these as valid marriages. Paul's argument through this is that becoming a Christian after you have been married does not change your marriage at all; it is still a valid marriage.

I think the problem had arisen because of what Paul had said, or taught, in Corinth that is reflected in Chapter 6 where he speaks about "your bodies are members of Christ" {cf, 1 Cor 6:15 RSV}, and how wrong it was to take the members of Christ, the physical body that belongs to Jesus Christ, and to involve it with the temple prostitutes of Corinth. That was a defiling act, and perhaps many had inferred from that that any kind of sexual union with an unbeliever was a defiling act -- that now you have a marriage where one is a Christian and the other is not and the Christian in that marriage is saying, "Do my sexual practices in marriage mean that I am taking the members of Christ and defiling them with an unbeliever?" Paul's assurance is, "No, you are not." As Hebrews says: "Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled," {cf, Heb 13:4}. The marriage, therefore, remains unchanged. "In fact," the apostle says, "a wonderful thing occurs. Instead of defiling, it is the other way around; it is the believing mate that, in a sense, sanctifies the unbeliever." Now that does not mean "saves them" or "regenerates them." That is always an individual matter left up to the individual faith. What it means is no defilement is involved when sexual union occurs in such a marriage, but rather it sets the unbeliever apart for a special treatment by the Lord; there is a strong exposure to a loving witness that is very difficult for him or her to resist, and it may very well ultimately lead that unbelieving mate to the Lord.

There is a woman in our congregation here whom I have long admired because, for years, she has been married to a non-Christian, and she has lived a godly life before her mate and her children. As a result of her own godliness, most of her children have come to the Lord, but her husband still resists. And it is very difficult for me to understand how he is able to resist through the years because of the witness that he has to face -- not pressuring, not embarrassing him in any way, but a quiet, loving, proper Christian witness.

And this is what the apostle says. There is the possibility extended in a mate remaining in such a marriage that his or her unbelieving mate will come to Christ, and very likely the children as well. Therefore, they are set apart in a special relationship, husband and children alike, or wife and children alike, and that is a marriage, then, that needs to be preserved.

Now what if the unbeliever does not like that? What if he or she resents the fact that his or her mate will not go along with the same standards that he or she has? What if he or she is angry and upset all the time because of the new-found faith, or the growing faith, of his or her mate, and he or she decides not to stay in that marriage any longer? Well, the apostle says, "let the unbeliever depart." It may cause much heartache; these things are so close to us they can hardly be carried out, sometimes, without much heartache. But, "let him depart," Paul says. In such a case the brother or sister is not bound.

I have carefully checked all the commentaries available to me on this passage and have found that almost unanimously all the commentators agree that phrase, "not bound," means that the marriage has ended and that remarriage is permitted by the Christian involved in that kind of a liaison. The reason the apostle gives is that "God has called us to peace." Continual antagonism between two people of different faiths resulting in a constant chafing of one or the other in the marriage is not good. If the unbeliever takes the initiative (that is the qualification that must always be present), and wants to leave, then do not saddle him or her with legal restrictions or economic barriers that prevent him or her from doing so. That is what Paul is saying.

Now that is supported by Verse 16. (By the way, I now must take an entirely opposite view from the way I have understood that verse previously.) Paul says, "Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife?" I grew up with the idea that that meant to hang onto the marriage at all costs. Do not let him or her go because there is still the possibility that you might reach through and he or she will be saved. But taken in its proper context it is a reference to "Let him depart," and it is an argument in support of it. What the apostle is saying is, "Do not try to force him or her into regeneration. You cannot know that you are going to save him or her if he or she stays in the marriage. You cannot know that he or she is going to believe if you hold onto him or her legally, regardless of his or her desire to leave." So his argument is: God has called us to peace rather than continual bickering and quarreling in this area, and in that particular case of a mixed marriage if the unbeliever desires to depart, let him or her depart.

The final paragraphs teach us how to handle conditions that are difficult, in marriage or any other realm of life. Verse 17:

**Only let every one lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. {1 Cor 7:17 RSV}**

Paul means by that that this is not something peculiar to Corinth. This is a rule that should apply to Christians anywhere, both in every place and in all of time. Therefore, it is applicable for us today here in California as it was in Corinth. In other words, where you are is not an accident. God put you where you are. You may not even yet be a Christian, but that does not mean God has not been at work in your life. Paul said that he discovered after he came to Christ that he had been "separated unto Christ from his mother's womb," but he never realized that until he was on the Damascus road and found Jesus there. Yet through everything that was happening in his life, though he was a wild radical, a revolutionary anti-Christian breathing out threatenings and slaughter, God was at work to bring him to the place and the time when his conversion would occur.

And that is true of you too. God has assigned you a place in life, and you have made a lot of choices along the line to get there. God has worked through your choices, not to control you so that you had to do something, but to allow you free choice and yet work it out. Therefore, you are where God wants you to be. "Do not fight it," Paul says. "Stay in the place where God has assigned you; he has called you there." Called you to what? Why, this very letter tells you. It opens with the word in Chapter 1, Verse 9:

**God is faithful, by whom you were called ... {1 Cor 1:9a RSV}**

Into what?

**... into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. {1 Cor 1:9b RSV}**

That is our calling, and that inner fellowship is the means by which strength may be obtained to live in difficult or disturbing circumstances. That is the argument the apostle has throughout this passage.

He does not mean by this, however, to keep on doing no matter what you were doing when you became a Christian. You may have been a madam in a house of prostitution. You may have been a professional gambler, or a bootlegger, or a bank robber, and God is not saying, "Now that you are a Christian, keep on being a Christian bank robber." He does not mean that. He is not talking about occupation; he is talking about relationships, and he goes on to show you what he means.

Verse 18a:

**Was any one at the time of his call already circumcised? [i.e. "Was he a Jew?"] Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. {1 Cor 7:18a RSV}**

That is what some of them felt they had to do. In James Michener's book *The Source*, he tells about a young man who was a Jew and who wanted to become like the Greeks, so he went through a painful surgical operation to remove the marks of circumcision. This was common in the Greek games where the athletes competed naked.

Paul says you do not have to remove those marks. Verse 18b:

**Was any one at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. {1 Cor 7:18b RSV}**

Bodily marks that indicate a former commitment you made are insignificant; they do not have to be removed. I know Christian men who are embarrassed to take their shirts off in public because they are tattooed. They probably had it done when they were young, in the Navy, and drunk! Now they see how foolish it was and they wish they could get rid of it. Paul says that is neither here nor there. Circumcision, uncircumcision, tattooed, untattooed -- it does not make any difference. The key to your life is not your outward looks, but what is going on in your heart, between you and the Lord, and the relationship you have to him.

Verse 19:

**For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. [By trust in the power and the life of God.] Every one should remain in the state in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. {1 Cor 7:19-23 RSV}**

That is a very insightful passage. Paul is dealing here with the common problem of slavery in that day, and yet what he says is interesting. Basically, what he says is, "To be a slave or to be free is not the overriding consideration of life: it is what you are inside that counts." In the novel *Roots*, and in the television portrayal of that book, it was very evident that some of the slaves who were believers in Christ were much more noble, more loving, more compassionate, more understanding, demonstrated more integrity than their "free" masters. This whole passage calls us to the fact that *that* is the true freedom.

Now Paul is not denying the possibility that God may so arrange things that an opportunity for freedom is given. If so, "Take it," he says. Basically, it is a gift of God. Christianity, though it is revolutionary, it is not designed to be radically so. It is not a violent overthrow of systems of the past, but it is clear that it is, in practice, designed to free one from within. This is what the apostle is saying. So if you are in a situation that is difficult to handle, and hard to bear, remember that is only external; it is only temporary and passing, and you can be free in Christ in a most beautiful and effective and influential way.

So Paul closes with these words, Verse 24:

**So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God. {1 Cor 7:24 RSV}**

Those are key words: with God -- regardless of what your situation may be, even if you cannot change it, even if it is a so-called "difficult" marriage, remember that God is able to meet you right where you are and to fill your life with love and joy and peace despite the struggles. The struggles themselves will help you do it if you understand them as God's choice for you.

So, Paul says, "... do not become slaves of men." How do you become slaves of men?

- Well, you do when you conform to the world around, when you let the opinions of the secular writers shape your judgments as to what you ought to be in marriage, or whether you ought to get a divorce or not. You are becoming a slave to men, instead of to the Lord, when you do that.
- When you follow after teachers in the church and think of one as being better and preferable to the other, you are becoming a slave of men.
- When you give way to the secular pressures to sexual infidelity you are becoming a slave of men.

Do not become slaves of men, Paul says, but remain where you are, "with God."

### **Prayer**

Thank you, Father, for the clarity of the Word, for the authority that you have given to your authorized spokesmen, the apostles, for the understanding of life which this represents, and for the grace that comes to us to help us live under the difficult situations in which we find ourselves. Lord, for those who struggle and those who have difficulty accepting, grant to them now obedient, softened hearts that they may walk honestly and gently before you, trusting your love and grace to carry them through. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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